

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONGREGATIONAL BIBLE  
STUDY AND THE DISCERNMENT OF THE  
CHURCH'S MISSIONAL CALL

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# **PROJECT PROPOSAL**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONGREGATIONAL BIBLE STUDY AND THE DISCERNMENT OF THE CHURCH'S MISSIONAL CALL**

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Slifers Presbyterian Church in Farmersville, Ohio, began a process of Discovery-Discernment-Embodiment designed by the Center for Parish Development to help the church rediscover God's missional call. The purpose of this study was to explore how congregational Bible Study relates to missional call. The research focused on two separate Bible Studies in which the congregation participated. The data was collected with self-administered before-and-after questionnaires and individual interviews. This communal practice of placing Scripture at its center helped the church gain a deeper connection with God, be clear about its mission, and respond as a congregation and as individuals in daily life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have participated in this work. I would like to thank the community of Slifers Presbyterian Church for all of their encouragement and for their leadership and work in the work of transformation the church engaged in. I would like to thank the Coordinating team composed of Justin Cline, Jennifer Gray, Paul Leatherman, Cinda Shell, and Tangy Thomas; and the Vision team composed of Sara Keener, Janice Kronour, Holly Michaels, Beth Ney, Thalia Stoff, and Linda Suttman. In particular I would like to thank Janice Kronour and Greg Shell who gave up a lot of their time. They were great sounding boards, they encouraged me, and helped me keep on track.

The Center for Parish Development provided guidance and the process that we followed. The ideas, manuals, and Bible Studies they provided were excellent and included many creative ideas on how to implement each step of Discovery, Discernment, and Embodiment in the Transformation process. I would especially like to thank Ray Schulte, Director of the Center for Parish Development. He is an excellent workshop leader. Our team and I learned a lot from him about Church Transformation, Group process, and the importance of Listening to God. In addition he kindly allowed me to print the Bible Studies that were used, which were created by the Center.

My mentors and colleagues were an invaluable help. My mentors Dr. Hairston and Dr. Dalton offered much needed guidance, helping me to focus my project, helping to challenge the foundation of my project to make it better, and encouraging me to be clear in my writing. I am very grateful to Doug Ervin, Brendon Prutzman, and Dr. Larry Grunden who read my drafts, gave invaluable feedback, and met with me and encouraged me. I am very thankful for the theological help my father, Dr. Karel Hanhart, gave. It was a joy to talk and I am thankful for the help and insights he gave. I now know a little of what it was like to have written three books. Thank you, Dad.

One of the most difficult parts of putting this project together is the detailed work of editing. It is such a relief to know that Sally Athmer was willing to edit and my administrative assistant, Kathleen Boston, was willing to work on documents. Not only did they do an amazing job but it was done with grace and love.

## **DEDICATION**

The paper is dedicated to my wife, Linda.

Without her love, patience, and prodding, Seminary and this Doctor of Ministry project  
would have been nearly impossible.

## INTRODUCTION

It seems like a no-brainer to have Bible study in church—no need to be studying that. Yet past efforts at meaningful congregational discernment of their missional call has proven to be harder than one might think. It is especially difficult to end up with a positive response. In past transformational efforts of which this author has been a part, Bible study was often not a church-wide effort, nor central to the process. George Barna's book *The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and Apply God's Vision for Your Ministry*<sup>1</sup> includes 13 chapters designed to guide congregational leaders in discerning a vision. Some of the chapter titles are "Masters of Vision," "What is Vision?" "Don't Confuse Vision with Mission," "Myths that Mar Vision," "Whose Vision Are You Following?" "Your Ministry will Benefit," and "Vision Killers." One chapter, "Capturing God's Vision," talks about the importance of study, prayer, and fasting. The emphasis in this and other books this researcher has looked at do a very good job of teaching how to help lead a congregation who is in the process of discerning their mission, or vision. Scripture study is a part of but not really central to their discussion. Other books such as *What Is the Mission of the Church? A guide for Catholics* by Roger Schroeder, and *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* by Tim Chester, are similar in that they emphasize processes and understanding of mission.

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna, *The Power of Vision : How You Can Capture and Apply God's Vision for Your Ministry* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1992).

This project looks specifically at congregational Bible study, and how it relates to missional call. Congregational Bible study for this project means that the whole congregation studies the same passages together. It is this author's belief that this is of central importance in seeking a vision for the church that is in some way transformational.

This is a study which takes place in a small rural congregation in southwest Ohio. The pastor began serving the church in 2002. Their paths crossed not just physically but they also shared an interest and desire for renewal; for Church transformation. The first chapter of this study details that connection, the history, and the current situation that brought them to this work. Why is it important to seek a new vision? How have they gone about this in the past? What process are they planning on following to discern God's mission for them?

There is a lot of information available concerning Church renewal, or Church transformation. However, this study is more interested in Congregational Bible study and missional call with the field of research focused on community, and Scripture study, and how they intersect in discerning mission. The research is designed to gain more understanding of several global questions concerning congregation and Scripture study. The church's discernment of a new vision and their Congregational Scripture study will provide the live example. It is hoped that insight gained will provide some underpinning from which to draw conclusions. The global questions are: Will the congregation be open to listening to and participate in these communal Scripture studies? Will the congregation shift their focus to discerning what God's mission is for them, letting go of their own personal sense of direction? The concerns of the past have been focused on the

number of members and getting more members. Will a communal practice of Scripture study have an effect on the Slifers Community, its internal relationship and participation? Will the communal practice of Scripture study have an effect on Slifers' connection with God, their understanding of God, listening to God? Is it possible to think afresh about what God is calling the church to be and do in this time and place, and to be open to a radically new vision, a new way of thinking, and to new patterns of behavior?

The foundation of this project is based on two very important times in the Bible. In both instances, one in the Hebrew Scriptures and one in the New Testament, communities of faith found themselves in difficult or changed circumstances. Both turned to Scripture study as a way to discern God's mission for them. There are also other current examples and authors writing on this topic. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought the difference between faithful Christian communities truly listening to Scripture and members of those churches who followed the Nazis was a failure of the latter to be in faithful community listening to the challenge of Scripture. Today there are many challenges faced by congregations and written about and important authors are exploring Communal Scripture study. The second chapter contains a review of this literature.

The foundation of this work is based in Scripture and the third chapter of this study contains a complete analysis of two Scripture passages as well as a theological discussion of the passages and the topic in general. This foundational work is really the heart of the study. One result of this foundational work is that this author is very interested in pursuing this study further as it has important implications, in particular in the area of church conflict. People like Bonhoeffer, Fowl, and Burgess have written about the importance of communal Scripture reading during church conflict in exciting ways.

Slifers Presbyterian Church took two years to discern a new vision. They believe God has a mission for their church and it is up to them to discern it and to live it out. A central part of this discernment is three series of Scripture studies. The last two series of Scripture studies will be studied, and the methodology to accomplish this is explained in Chapter Four. In essence the participants will complete surveys all the way through the two studies. An analysis of the resulting data will be presented in Chapter Five and concluding thoughts can be found in the last chapter.

At the back of this work you will find the three series of Scripture studies, the survey data, the new vision, the new vision Bible study, and a complete Bibliography.



## CHAPTER ONE

### MINISTRY FOCUS

Inagrace Dietterich, in her article entitled “In Good Company: Becoming Faithful Readers and Doers of Scripture,” stresses the importance of the cultivation of faithful hearers and doers of the word. It is central to the discernment of vision and direction of the church. She starts her article with the following quote by Richard B. Hays from “Scripture Shaped Community” in *Interpretation*, January 1990.

Scripture is not just one among several “classics.” Not just one source of moral wisdom competing in a marketplace of ideas, experiences and feelings. Scripture is the wellspring of life, the fundamental source for the identity of the church...Right reading of the New Testament occurs only where the word is embodied. We learn what the text means only if we submit ourselves to its power in such a way that we are changed by it...Until we see God’s power at work among us we do not know what we are reading. Thus the most crucial hermeneutical task is the formation of communities seeking to live under the word.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian church, and in particular Slifers Presbyterian Church, which is the context for this study, finds itself in a totally new circumstance and needing to discern a way forward, to discern God’s call to them in this new circumstance. The centrality of Scripture in discerning the vision and direction of the church is supported by The Book of Order of the PCUSA as well. In the chapters outlining the foundation of the church it notes the important guidance of Scripture in the life of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich, “Cultivating Missional Communities,” *The Center Letter* 39, no. 1 (2009).

“Christ gives to his Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its officers and ordinances. Insofar as Christ’s will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (Book of Order G-1.0100 c.).

Not only is Scripture important in discerning the leading of the Spirit but communities of faith are important in interpreting. “Christian communities provide the contexts whereby we learn—as the body of Christ through the power of the holy Spirit—to interpret, and to have our lives interpreted by, the scriptural texts such that we are formed and transformed in the moral judgment necessary for us to live faithfully before God.”<sup>1</sup> “Of course it is possible to trust that such communities will be simultaneously imaginative and faithful only if one trusts. As Paul did, in the power of the Holy Spirit to disclose truth and give life.”

Worship and mission, reflection and practice are important in the practice of our ministry. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) incorporates these elements into its method of learning, which essentially is one of reflection, practice, and then starting over with reflection. Learning in this way has become an important method of ministry. The CPE model taught this author the importance of reflection on experience and on the Scriptures in learning and growing. This practice reinforced the conviction that the practice of Bible study is central to the church in each age as we discern anew God’s call.

This author was a member of a small team of missionaries to the city center of Dubuque, Iowa, led by Dr. David Scotchmer, Evangelism Professor at the University of

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<sup>1</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich, " Leading the Missional Church: The Shape of the Church," in *Vol 27* (Chicago Ill: Center for Parish Development, 1997).

Dubuque Theological Seminary. He began this ministry to the Churches and people of downtown Dubuque. He opened the eyes of a small group of fellow seminary students interested in urban ministry. He taught us how to use Scripture to discern the direction in which the Spirit was leading. We met weekly to discuss, plan, and act upon our deliberations. One particular meeting stands out. It was the first of these meetings, held in the Single Room Occupancy building we had purchased. Dr. Scotchmer read from the book of Jeremiah and spoke of Jeremiah's call to care for the city where he was located. He read the passage again, and we were invited to share what we heard the passage to say. We were all energized by the experience and our focus was sharpened. More importantly we grounded our work in something bigger than a present need or desire. This author learned that amazing things can happen in ministry when you take time to focus and to be grounded in Scripture as a community. Out of a seed of five people a new ministry for homeless men grew. Local churches in Dubuque, whose parishioners had moved out into the suburbs, began to open their churches and communities to offer food, meals, and clothing to those in need. This experience has been a foundational example of the importance of Scripture reflection in the life of the Church.

The work of discerning missional call has been at the center of the churches this author has served. The question often is how can a church continue in its healthy and vibrant life in the middle of many changes and challenges. This author has been a part of several efforts to help a particular church adapt to a new environment in which it finds itself.

While serving as pastor in a yoked church in the towns of Merrill and Gleason, Wisconsin, the Merrill church was searching for direction. They looked around and saw

that they could be of service to the middle school next door. They received a grant to start a Homework Assistance Mission Program referred to as HAM. A part-time director was hired, and the church started a new after-school program to help kids with their studies. One of the challenges for the church was to engage more of the members of the church in this ministry. The program continued through the life of the grant but support dwindled after that.

The Growth Committee of Winnebago Presbytery of which the Merrill / Gleason Presbyterian Churches are a part developed a collaborative model in which each church was encouraged to discover a mission or project they felt called to do. A neighboring church was assigned to encourage them and help them to accomplish what they had discerned. Training, using her manual “Shared Ministry,” was offered by Jean Morris Trumbauer. A couple of the churches in the Presbytery began their process of discerning what it was they wanted to do. A successful relationship between the churches came about as they cooperated in these missions. It was difficult to get started on these mission projects. It was, however, a very good learning experience on the collaborative process.

The next place of ministry for the author was Slifers Presbyterian Church in Farmersville, Ohio. The church is a family-sized church. In the fifties and sixties it was the center of community life. In the last 10 years the average worship attendance has dropped. Currently it averages 60, down from 109 in 1998.<sup>2</sup> The Roll Book of those who have served on the Session (the ruling body of the church) was reviewed. Since 1998, thirty percent have died or moved elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Slifers has an active women’s morning and

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<sup>2</sup> 1998-2008 Statistics for Slifers Presbyterian Church PCUSA.

<sup>3</sup> 1995-2009 The Slifers Presbyterian Roll Book.

evening circle, four education classes each Sunday, and an adult choir, bell choir, and praise band.

The church used to be the center of community life. Now there is an uncertainty about the future. The slow decline in numbers is a concern of the church. There is a desire to reach out to the neighborhood with the message of the gospel whether in word or deed. In 2001 the church completed a mission study which included a new mission statement.

Slifers Statement of Mission:

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church

As the BODY of Christ, Slifers Church will be:

His HANDS. We will use our hands to pray, help, and heal.

His FEET. We will use our feet to carry forth the Good News.

His HEART. We will show compassion and love to one and all.

The church sees its overall mission to *be* the body of Christ. The result of the study was that the church saw six areas for improvement, (a) Interpretation and Stewardship, (b) Christian Education, (c) Property, (d) Member Care, (e) Worship, and (f) Administration. It was discovered that the church was able to work in one or two areas, but it was difficult to work in all areas at once. The Session saw a need to focus on a specific task, and took a year in 2005 to listen more carefully to God's calling to the church in this time and place. A strategic plan was developed in 2006 called "Who is my Neighbor?" by a special committee along with the help of the Session. In the ensuing three years Slifers worked on several mission projects and developed a strategy to reach

out into the neighborhood. These efforts were led by the Session however the congregation was not very engaged in these projects.

The Session of Slifers decided to take a more comprehensive approach to the issue of focus, of listening to God, and of meeting the challenge of its mission in a changing world. It has begun a three-year “Journey of Congregational Transformation” that incorporates three phases of learning and activity tailored to fit Slifers life and local circumstances. The three phases of the “Journey of the People of God” are “Discovering, Discerning, and Embodying.” The first phase is about discovering who we are, in our present situation and our community. The second phase is to become in tune with the Spirit and discern the purpose of our missional work. In the last phase we put what we have gleaned into practice. In essence the goal of our work is the transformation of the congregation to a more missional posture.

There are six churches in the surrounding area going through the same process and all are supported by the “Center for Parish Development” in Chicago, Illinois. The idea is that the churches will support one another in a journey of congregational transformation.

The current work of congregational transformation includes some important elements that were not a part of Slifers’ “Who is my Neighbor?” project of 2006. There are several events planned which include discovery and discernment of the past and present situation of the church and its community. There is a Congregational Bible study planned for each Phase to help the congregation to get a clearer view of their calling. It will be interesting to see how congregational transformation will be enhanced and embraced by the congregation when communal Bible study is included.

In early 2010 Slifers began this process of transformation. The theme that the Coordinating team chose was “Scouting for God’s Spirit,” reminding all that it is our job to open our eyes to the leading of God’s Spirit. We realize that it is God’s mission that needs a church, not our mission that God needs to support.

The Center for Parish Development designed the framework of a journey that the congregation embarked on, including a Conference of the Past, Hypotheses, a Conference on the Present, and a Conference on the Future. Each of these steps is grounded in Scripture. The Bible studies included are entitled “Behold: There is a New Creation,” “People of Salt and Light,” and “Co-Missioned.” We are tailoring the Bible Studies to be a study designed to include the whole congregation.

The purpose of this study is to explore how congregational Bible Study relates to the discernment of God’s missional call. It is believed that taking time for broadly participatory Bible study, reflection, and discussion is not a luxury but a necessity for congregations. It is hoped that as many participants in the life and ministry of the church as possible—not just a select few—participate. It is in the broad participation and dialogue of the congregation that the voice of God to the church will be most readily heard and followed. It is hoped that at the end of the journey toward congregational transformation the church will grow as a learning community, as the congregation explores, shares, and grows in their faith together on a continuing basis.

The project will take place with the members of Slifers Presbyterian Church who are going through a process of discerning God’s missional call. Their journey, or work together, includes two Bible Studies.

These Bible studies will take place during the spring of 2011 as the people of Slifers discuss and discern a vision and direction for their congregation. The two Bible studies are written by the Center for Parish Development and are a part of the entire process of congregational transformation that they have developed. The first Bible study, called “The People of Salt and Light: Jesus’ Model for Community,” is 4 weeks long and will take place in people’s homes. Leaders from the congregation will be asked to facilitate. The format will include a reading of Scripture with the whole group, followed by discussion. There will be a two-hour training for the leaders. The second study, called “Co-Missioned,” will be six weeks long. The Coordinating Committee that is guiding the process of church transformation will be leading the Bible Studies. The entire congregation will be invited in both studies via notice in the newsletter and a letter personally inviting them to participate.

The research question this author will explore is “How does congregational Bible Study relate to discernment of a new congregational vision and direction? Will it strengthen their sense of identity, of belonging, of vision and focus for the church?”

The action research approach was used in the project’s research design. This model ensures the inclusion of a team of professional and context associates, and leaders of the church who are seeking to improve the congregation’s missional work and focus. The approach promotes broad participation and increases the usefulness of the study and work. Slifers’ leadership and congregation embarked on the project. They are expecting a result of actionable change. This project’s purpose is to research and document a portion of that work. The action research model is perfect for this project.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research : Social Research for Social Change* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998).



The data for this study will be collected through a self-administered questionnaire. The Bible Study leaders will administer the pre-test and post-test, which will contain the same questions. They will also administer a flash test after each session. In addition, there will also be a small random sampling of participants who will be interviewed to augment the information gleaned from the questionnaire. The interviews will allow for some expanded answers to the self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire will be guided by a resource called *Studying Congregations: a New Handbook*,<sup>5</sup> and through discussion with the Professional Associates for this project. The Bible Study will take place in February of 2010, and during the 6 weeks of Lent. The pre-test will be given just prior to the beginning of the study and just prior to week two of the study. The post test will be given to all those who took the pre-test.

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERARY REVIEW**

This study is about the community of Slifers Presbyterian Church, people who are faced with a changed reality and recognize a need to discover God's call to them in this new circumstance. It is postulated that communal Scripture study is important in this process. In other words, it is important for the congregation as a whole to listen to and study Scripture to discern God's direction for them. This is not a new situation for Christian communities. Two Biblical stories will be foundational to this researcher. They are about a community of people who also faces the challenge of new circumstances and a need to listen to God's direction. An important beginning for this study was to survey the current Biblical, Historical, and Theological literature on this topic.

#### **Biblical**

The first of the Biblical stories takes place around 445 B.C.E. when the people of God returned from exile in Babylon to a deserted and ravaged city, indeed their Temple was destroyed. Ezra the scribe and the people of Israel believed that their exile had occurred because of their unfaithfulness to God. In addition, during their exile they have not been able to worship in the Temple and so believe they have not been faithful to God.

Upon their return the people of God gather before the Water Gate and hear the reading of the entire book of the law. They seek a new direction as they study it, and discover a word from God for them. I hope to find out more in my research about this reading in community, and how it affected a change in the people.

The second pivotal point in Scripture is after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when the Christian church was first forming. In Acts we read about this new community and its formation, we read about the important elements that enable the people to listen to and follow “The Way.” Luke the writer of Acts speaks of the four pillars of the healthy Christian community. One of the four is the reading and study of the Torah, and learning about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, This reading and study takes place within this faithful community, faithful to each other and faithful to God.

This is a fascinating subject to study. In many churches, community is very important in their life together. Yet at times it is lived without challenging each other, without honestly speaking to each other about the most important book, the Bible, and without listening to Scripture’s challenge to them. This author hopes to discover in the research more about these two elements, which were present in Ezra and Nehemiah’s time and in the early church described in Acts, to learn more about communal Scripture study, and its relevance for a discovery of the church community’s mission.

Some excellent biblical books give great insights into this story. First, L. Allen and T. Laniak’s, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. These two studies are part of the Old Testament series of the New International Biblical Commentary. The authors promote a

rather conservative approach in line with the Hendrickson Publishing House.”<sup>1</sup> The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are interpreted by Leslie Allen while Timothy Laniak deals with the book of Esther.

This is the most current commentary researched. Leslie Allen’s approach is interesting because he coined the phrase “a book of new beginnings.”<sup>2</sup> He thus characterizes the prophecy of Ezra and Nehemiah as “the OT equivalent of the Acts of the Apostles.”

The choice for this project to study a passage of Nehemiah and one of the Book of Acts runs along the same line: searching for a new beginning in community life. The comparison was borrowed from this commentary. It is shown that the chosen passages both feature a new beginning in the life of God’s people. Yet, the two settings differ widely because Ezra-Nehemiah delineate a new beginning in the long history of the Jewish people while Acts marks the beginning of the ecclesia, a branch (or a sect if you will) of the people of God. Ecumenically speaking, a discussion of Christian Jewish relations should be a matter of consideration for a modern parish. However for this author Allen’s connection was interesting.

Allen explores Ezra-Nehemiah as a single literary text telling the story of three missions and the opposition with which Ezra and Nehemiah are confronted. He therefore divided the study in three parts. The first two parts are the returnees from exile and instructions to the returnees concerning temple worship and adherence to the Law. The third section deals with the beginning of Nehemiah. It deals mostly with the rebuilding of

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Leslie C. Allen and Timothy S. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: Based on the New International Version*, New International Biblical Commentary Old Testament Series (Peabody, Mass. Carlisle, Cumbria, Hendrickson Publishers, Paternoster Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 76.

the walls of Jerusalem, an appealing subject. Nehemiah is especially concerned with the repopulation of the city.

Ezra is a priestly figure while Nehemiah is a secular administrator. Both are concerned with the theme of purity, namely, in worship and in the purity of the population. Allen's commentary illuminates these texts in the specific context of that crucial new beginning. In this respect the beginnings in the Book of Acts are all the more interesting in comparison to the message in Acts. It is good to interpret a book in its historical context.

Another excellent commentary, published by the Liturgical Press, offers good insight into this story. It is *Ezra and Nehemiah* by Gordon Davies in the Berit Olam series.<sup>3</sup> The author approaches the text looking at the situation from a variety of angles. He analyzes rhetorical devices and vocabulary structure, and offers a literal translation. It is written from the perspective of the history of the Jewish people. The text is important in Judaism, as it was written after the Persian period and is a reminder to keep the Torah, and to be faithful and pure.

Gordon F. Davies is a widely respected interpreter of the Old Testament. The Berit Olam series aims at reading Scripture from a Jewish perspective. It is precisely for this reason his work was chosen, because the question of what constitutes "purity" of religion is also at the heart of the Gospel. It will be a consideration in this project. For Jesus' view of what is clean and pure in the eyes of God appears to be in conflict with what these scribes in Jerusalem taught.

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon F. Davies and others, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999).

The comparison with a passage of the New Testament is, of course, not the subject of Davies' research. He rather focuses on the newest avenue of exegetical research, that of rhetorical criticism and of the reader's response. The aim of an author is to convince his or her readers of a central concept. In the context of uncertainty of the returnees from Babylon, rules and regulations for the pursuit of a word of God were needed. The detailed examination of each text and section gives insight into the effects that the speeches and prayers would have had on the people in their situation.

Like Allen, Davies doesn't see the prophecy of Ezra and Nehemiah as two different books, but approaches both as one literary unit. In following the method of rhetorical criticism Davies unearths deeper layers of theological meaning than a text by text analysis would provide. Here too the theology makes sense, read against the historical background of the people of God.

We discover in our century the need for closer examination of biblical books dating from Second Temple period. These books were influential in shaping the culture and thought in first-century Judaism and the formation of the early Christian community. The rhetorical approach uncovering the leading ideas and goals of Ezra and Nehemiah is especially important to assess our question of what constituted the "new beginning."

The third commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah reviewed is part of the third volume of *The Interpreter's Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. *The Interpreter's Bible* has long been the mainstay for pastors of a former generation.

The books of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Job are treated in this third volume. Though published quite a while ago, it still contains helpful basic information. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and *The Illustrated Encyclopedia*

identify and explain all proper names and significant terms and subjects in the Holy Scriptures. Though the volume on Nehemiah is dated (1955), the *Interpreter's* still offers helpful basic information.

However, relatively little space is devoted to both Ezra and Nehemiah. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* identifies and explains all proper names and significant terms and subjects of the period. In addition, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, by Ballmer H Kelly, published by John Knox Press, was a good overall commentary from the reformed perspective.

One particular commentary, by Lester Grabbe, was less helpful than the others. Grabbe has contributed greatly to advance the history of Second Temple Judaism. His volume on Jewish history, including the Maccabean revolt and its aftermath much advances the discussion on the subject of Jewish history prior to the Common Era.

His book on Ezra-Nehemiah (1998) dates, however, from of an earlier period. It includes a study of history, literary point of view, other traditions, and the text. Although the scope of the book makes for interesting reading, it is less helpful for the study of the particular passage in Nehemiah chosen for this project.

There is an overwhelming amount of Biblical commentary on the Acts of the Apostles as it is one of the most important books in the formation of the Christian church. Several commentaries will be included in the research. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church and an important scholar on the reformed faith wrote *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>4</sup> John Calvin's commentary discusses the book chapter by chapter. He discusses Acts Chapter 2 and his understanding of the four pillars of Christian community.

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949).

Justo Gonzalez wrote a commentary entitled *The Gospel of the Spirit*.<sup>5</sup> This was a very helpful text in that it approached the Acts of the Apostles from the standpoint of the Holy Spirit's part in God's communication with the people. Gonzalez writes from the viewpoint of Liberation Theology. His work deeply influenced the life of the Church in South America. Priests who sided with the poor in the region came in conflict with the rich landowners. The distribution of goods discussed in the Acts passage chosen (Acts 4:32-35) is of particular interest to Gonzalez. He derives his particular emphasis from those illuminating verses. It is a part of the larger concept of Koinonia which is central to the formation and maintaining of Christian Community.

Gonzalez reminds us that when reading the Scriptures a large portion of our understanding is our ability to listen. He points out key places in the Book of Acts where the Spirit has been mentioned in particular. This emphasis of the role of the Spirit in the Church is in sync with Karl Barth's understanding of Revelation, namely, that it begins with God.

It stands to reason that Gonzalez focuses on the distribution of goods in light of his Liberation Theology. Our passage brings this particular emphasis. It is a part of the larger concept of Koinonia which is central to the formation and maintaining of Christian Community.

Few Greek words are as common among Christians today as is Koinonia (fellowship). In some circles all claim to know the meaning of Koinonia as "fellowship," however such a translation reflects only one of the many shades of meaning of this word, and perhaps not even the most important meaning. In its common use in the daily life on the first century, Koinonia did not refer only to a good feeling or

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<sup>5</sup> Justo L. González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).



fellowship among friends. It also meant “corporation,” “common enterprise,” or “company” similar to the way today we might say that Peter and John own a “company,” that they are “partners” or that they have a corporation. There is no doubt that Koinonia is fellowship, but it is also solidarity and the sharing of feelings, goods, and actions.<sup>6</sup>

Gerd Ludemann in his book *The Acts of the Apostles*<sup>7</sup> wrote that the description Luke gave of the community was an idealized one. The summary of the practice of the early communities is also really an ideal that Luke hopes the Church would live up to “... Luke throws a highly favorable light on the primitive church of Jerusalem. He presents a utopian portrait of the Jerusalem community and at the same time recalls Greek ethical ideals.<sup>8</sup> Ludemann’s book on the Acts of the Apostles is much more factual, and as historically accurate as possible. Ludemann misses, however, the Spiritual and Theological importance of Community, and the long history of God’s relating to God’s people. No doubt, this is due to his overall exegetical stance. He is revolting against the interpretation of the Gospel by the majority and blames the churches for being blind to what to him are the factual historical facts of the early Christian movement.

However, Charles Yrigoyen in his book *Acts for our Time*<sup>9</sup> speaks of the Holy Spirit’s importance in this extraordinary moment in time when the Holy Spirit came in a powerful way to influence and guide the beginning of the Christian church. “... Luke wants to emphasize that it is really God who is the chief actor. The unfolding of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles : What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Yrigoyen, *Acts for Our Time*, Abingdon Lay Bible Studies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

church is mostly described by Luke as the work of the Holy Spirit, which is viewed as God's powerful presence active in human affairs.<sup>10</sup> "As Luke's Gospel ended with a commissioning and a promise of empowerment by God, Acts began with the same. The risen Christ said to his disciples, ...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.'" (Acts 12:8).<sup>11</sup>

### Historical

The historical situation of the people of God in Nehemiah's time, during the formation of the Christian church, is very relevant to this project as the reading and hearing of the Scriptures were essential in the renewal formation of the people of God.

*The Covenant Renewal in Ezra–Nehemiah (Nehemiah 7:70b -10 40)* by Michael Duggan<sup>12</sup> is a detailed account of the very time period and story studied for this project. It is a dissertation on the events before, during, and after the reading of the law in Chapter 8. The first 40 pages of the book are a discussion of the history of research on Nehemiah 7:72b -10:40. It is followed by a long discussion of the context and structure and finally sixty pages on the reading of the law and the Festival booths. Most interesting was the relationship of the law, the scribe, the Levites, and the community as a whole.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue : A Critical Analysis of Current Research*, Library of New Testament Studies (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2007); Michael Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b-10:40) : An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study*, Dissertation Series / Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

There is a plethora of information on the early church. So it was important to narrow the research for this project. The particular area of interest was the formation and kind of community described in Acts and their Scripture reading and worship practices.

Stephan Catto's book, *Reconstructing The First Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research*, covers the beginning of the synagogue in the diaspora through the New Testament. Included is the archaeological evidence for the synagogues and most helpful are the sections on worship practices within the synagogue and on the connection to the early church of Luke in Acts.

Paul would visit the synagogues and befriend someone who would invite him to their house. Christian communities were often formed in the homes of the wealthier of these patrons. People often met on the second floor room or upper room of their houses. The upper room in those days was generally one open room. These rooms would accommodate around 30 people.

*The First Urban Christians*,<sup>13</sup> by Wayne Meeks, is a book about the context of the early church, and the environment of the early church, city, and country for women and men in Jewish and Christian communities. Meeks discusses the social level of the Christians and the formation of the ecclesia. He tells of the governance of the early church of the rituals of Baptism, The Lord's Supper, and worship of the early church community. Luke's description of the early community is more than likely an idealized version, according to Meeks. So Meeks gives a very clear understanding of what the early Christian community was like.

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<sup>13</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

Reta Halteman Finger explains the social context, practice, and makeup of the early Christian community in a book entitled *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals In the Book of Acts*.<sup>14</sup> The first Christian believers shared property and met daily for a common meal amid holy celebration. The Lord's Supper developed along this continuum of shared meals. Finger spends one chapter discussing Acts 2:42 to 47, a foundational passage for this project. Finger looks at all aspects of life in that time, economic, social and spiritual. Christian community was much more than a group that met on Sunday for worship and study and on Wednesday evening. Their lives were much more connected to each other, their economic status was poor and they cared for each other, and shared in rituals of breaking bread and prayers.

Finger also wrote a book entitled *Paul and the Roman House Churches* in which she connects the historical context of the house churches and the people and situations described in the letters of Paul. She talks about the religious backgrounds of the earliest Christians, the social situations, public life, household life, and economics.<sup>15</sup>

Paul Barnett, in his book *The Birth of Christianity, The First Twenty Years* covers the letters, journeys of Paul's world in Christian history, and the teachings of Peter and Paul. This book is much broader in its scope.<sup>16</sup>

In particular, the stories in Nehemiah and Acts studied contain the two similar and important elements of community and Scripture study. Both of these communities were in transition. In the case of Nehemiah, the people returned from exile recognizing how

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<sup>14</sup> Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Reta Halteman Finger, *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years, After Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005).

they had been unfaithful. They heard the law, and through communal study came to understand, by way of a reminder of the Exodus story, that God was speaking to them of a joyful new beginning. Paul taught in the synagogues, and through their hearing and discussing the Scriptures some turned toward Jesus Christ. Teaching from the letters of Paul, and from the life of Christ, taught them about a new community. For example, they learned from the Beatitudes to welcome the stranger, the outsider, and the hungry.

"Transforming mission, *Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* by David J. Bosch is a major work on the Theology of Mission. It is a comprehensive book on the topic of mission through the ages from the Early Christian mission to the present. Mr. Bosch wrote this book in an attempt to demonstrate how the practice of mission has changed over the centuries. And that this process of change or transformation is an ongoing process. He points out that mission in the church faces several crises. He briefly discusses mission in the Old Testament, noting that for the most part mission, in terms of the traditional understanding of mission of sending people to others to convert them does not occur. "There is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh." <sup>17</sup> However the New Testament is essentially a book about mission.

For much of Christian history the term has been used with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. The connection is the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and by the Son. Since then, there has been many transformations of mission theologies which are discussed in this book. For example,

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<sup>17</sup> Bosch David J., *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000). 17.

theology of the Eastern Church, what the mission in the wake of the enlightened meant, Postmodern missiology, Liberation theology, Black theology, mission as ministry by the Whole People of God.

The first one third of the book discusses the motivation, the theology, and the purpose of mission in the early church. In particular, the author discusses in detail mission all theology of Matthew, Luke, and Paul. Mission was a fundamental expression of the life of the early church. "Christianity has never been more itself, more consistent with Jesus and more evidently en route to its own future, than in the launching of the world mission."<sup>18</sup> Matthew, Luke, and Paul were chosen because they best exemplified the breadth mission of the early.

The mission of the early Christian community was contained within the people of Israel. They continue to worship in the Temple and the synagogues up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. One of the differences between proselytes in the Jewish community and in the Christian community God fearers was that they were fully integrated into the community. There was controversy within the Gentiles Christian, Jewish, Christian community or the Aramaic speaking Jewish Christians and the Hellenistic or Greek speaking Jewish Christians.<sup>19</sup> The Hellenistic differed from Hebrews at decisive points by translating Jesus' message into Greek. "The Hellenistic believed that the Easter experience had bypassed Torah and Temple. It would be the spirit rather than the law that would guide the believer's life."<sup>20</sup> ... It was Paul who became the catalytic factor. He was the one who provided the theological basis for the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 43.

Torah – free self – definition of Gentile Christianity." <sup>21</sup> Bosch points out that the resolution of the conflict between the Hellenist's and the Jewish Christians was very important in order for the spread of Christianity to occur.

The early Christian mission was political, indeed revolutionary. The nature of early Christian mission manifested itself in the new relationship that came into being in the community. Jew Roman Greek barbarian Friesland rich poor women men all accepted as brothers and sisters. The expansion of the early church included the gospel of love and charity.<sup>22</sup> The new language on the lips of Christians was the language of love "but it was more than a language, it was a thing of power and action.". This was a "social gospel" in the very best sense of the word and was practiced not as a stratagem to lure us that his Pentateuch or outsiders to the church, but simply as a natural expression of faith in Christ." You didn't usher in a utopia but long for it to come Maren the our Lord come. Maranatha.<sup>23</sup> The community described in Acts benefited from this early history of the Christian Community.

### **Theological**

The elements of theology that are important in this project are (1) that God has chosen to reveal God to us through the Scriptures, (2) that God is best heard in communal Scripture study. The study needs to be about the whole message, not just a particular

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<sup>21</sup> J., *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.48.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 49.

book or passage, and the community needs to be open to the critique of Scripture and to the outsider.

Matthew Levering, in his theological commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah<sup>24</sup> quotes Origin concerning a proper approach to reading the Bible.

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. In each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure. Only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place, because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.<sup>25</sup>

The Scriptures then are a mosaic and must be looked at in that way. Levering points out that there isn't a linear understanding of Scripture, but as Jesus said he came to fulfill the Scriptures, which means that each participates in the other. The message of the Scriptures is not always readily apparent. Paul reminds us that we need to look into a mirror, dimly. With this understanding of interpreting the Scriptures Levering does a great job of connecting the story of Ezra to the story of Christ.

The reformed tradition is an important theological underpinning of this project. In his book *Theologies of Religious Education*, Randolph Miller discusses several different theological approaches to religious education, the first being the reformed tradition. He reviews important doctrines such as the doctrine of The Priesthood of All Believers, the Sovereignty of God, the life of faith and faithfulness, and the life of obedience in

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 9.



response to the grace of God.<sup>26</sup> These doctrines are important underpinnings for this project. The priesthood of all believers says that all are able to interpret Scripture, that the sovereignty of God is the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and God is sovereign over all.

The current theological scholarship on Reading Scripture in Communion goes to the core of this paper. Several books and articles were read in researching this topic. “The Center Letter, cultivating mission communities,” edited by Inagrace Dietterich has been very helpful. All 12 issues of the Center Letter in 2009 dealt with this topic. Ray Schulte, one of the professionals for this project, pointed this researcher to these letters and this topic. The series is entitled “In Good Company: Becoming Faithful Readers and Doers of Scripture.” The articles are very good and well sourced, and many of these sources were used in this paper. The September issue was particularly helpful as it spoke of the task of Christian communities to acquire the skills, desire, virtues, and community practices necessary to be faithful hearers of Scripture. The October issue continued fleshing out this topic and spoke of the importance of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the work of Christian formation.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Lisa Hess, in her book *Artisanal Theology*, speaks of the importance of radical covenantal companionships in a person’s spiritual formation. She notes that there are many challenges to communities of religious faith, for example, the polarized disputes over sexuality. And she believes that “covenantal companionship that promises expressive, theological delight is perhaps the only antidote to the overwhelming fear, pain

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<sup>26</sup> Randolph Crump Miller, *Theologies of Religious Education* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Inagrace Diettrich, “In Good Company: Becoming Faithful Readers and Doers of Scripture in Invitation to Enjoying in the Adventure of Learning,” *the center letter* Volume 39, no. Number 5 (2009).

and suffering so prevalent in the world today.<sup>28</sup> Spiritual formation is seated in this radical covenantal companionship.

“Whatever else might be said, the aim here has been to nudge, encourage, and urge with practical observations a process that depends upon a willingness to enter into such covenant, to participate in it, to allow body–mind–spirit to be challenged, stretched, even threatened a little with grace beyond bounds. Intentional formation requires engagement with the resources, persons, and theological institutions at a deeply intimate and risky level. Covenantal companionship presents the best, interpersonal, if risk-laden vehicle in which intentional formation in theological education can occur.<sup>29</sup> What is exciting is the connection that Hess makes to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s work called *Life Together*<sup>30</sup> and the importance placed on community life.

The aspect of Covenantal Companionship was most interesting to this author. In particular, Chapter Four most fits this project as it looks at how God’s story is incorporated into spiritual formation. It is entitled “Shaped by God’s Story: Becoming a Seasoned Apprentice–Artisan.”

Dr. Hess gives a snapshot of 2000 years of theology. She reviews Architectural theology and Practical theology. Within each category there are several subheadings such as Biblical studies, Systematic theology, Historical theology, Practical theology, Philosophical theology, and Spiritual or Mystical theology. Dr. Hess is most interested in practical theology, and the focus of Artisanal Theology lies within the perspective named

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<sup>28</sup> Lisa M. Hess, *Artisanal Theology : Intentional Formation in Radically Covenantal Companionship* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2009). 103.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 1st ed. (New York,: Harper, 1954).

theology in context. In essence, theology in context means that your situation affects your theology, or what Edward Farley would call the “interpretation of situations.”<sup>31</sup>

Dr. Hess points out that many aspects, perspectives, denominations, theologies, and disciplines affect a community perspective and understanding. In order to live with these differences, she points to the importance of communal discernment and the importance of risking one’s participation of community and being willing to be challenged within that community.

*Reading in Communion, Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* by Stephan E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones<sup>32</sup> is an excellent book on the topic of reading Scripture in Communion. The book examines community and revelation. The authors look at community and shares insights on becoming a wise reader of Scripture in Communion as the early Christian Community did, and the importance of recovering a common life together. Several chapters talk about hearing the word of God, the importance of listening to the outsider, and finally of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example of commitment to the Word.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s amazing little book *Life Together* is a gem. In this little paperback book Bonhoeffer lays out the importance of community and obedience to Scripture. He was faced with the dilemma as to how the churches in Germany could follow Hitler’s lead which was so opposite to the Christian faith. Community and Scripture reading is obviously not enough. Living in service to God and to others is key to living in Christian community. “Christian community is like the Christian’s

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<sup>31</sup> Hess, *Artisanal Theology: Intentional Formation in Radically Covenantal Companionship*, *Artisan Theology*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).

sanctification it is a gift of God which we cannot claim. Only God knows the real state of our fellowship, of our sanctification. What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature.”<sup>33</sup> The anchor of Christian community is Jesus Christ. “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”<sup>34</sup>

It is in the whole of the Scriptures that we learn about Jesus Christ, for the word of God is a light for today revealed to those whose lives are opened. “Holy Scripture is more than a watchword. It is also more than ‘light for today.’ It is God’s revealed word for all men, for all times. Holy Scripture does not consist of individual passages; it is a unit and is intended to be used as such as a whole. The Scriptures are God’s revealing word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, and the connection of old and new Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection from a faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived.”<sup>35</sup>

Eugene Peterson has recently written a translation of the Scriptures. He has not only translated words but also images, metaphors, and poetry into today’s language and culture. In his book *Eat This Book: a Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*,<sup>36</sup> he discusses his journey with reading Scripture in the Christian communities he served as pastor. He speaks of the difficulties parishioners had reading and trying to understand the text, of how the critical/historical method often confused the readers and depersonalized

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<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Life. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. 50-51.

<sup>36</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006).

the text. Petersen reviews the many translations of the text in various languages. Over time the text has been translated from Aramaic, to Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. He notes that in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah the Scriptures were more than likely translated into Aramaic, the language of Christ, and then in the time of Acts were translated into Greek and Latin. Petersen speculates on differences. He covers the importance of approaching the text with reverence and with the listening ear for the revealed word of God, versus approaching the text with a thought and idea of what is believed to be true and looking to see if that is right. He speaks of the importance of being obedient in the hearing. Peterson spends several chapters talking about Lectio Divina (holy reading) as a way of reading the text in community, which would prove fruitful.

There are many pitfalls to interpreting Scripture in community and listening for a Word from the Lord. Today's conflicted church is a case in point. John P. Burgess wrote a wonderful book entitled *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in A Time of Church Conflict*. He writes, "I have been to more than one denominational meeting in which the two sides have trotted out their biblical experts to explain the 'real meaning' of the passages in question. Under these circumstances, debate is truly interminable."<sup>37</sup> He goes on to speak about how the church has lost its ability to live in Communion, and lost its ability to look at the Scripture as a book that challenges us, a book that requires us to learn its entire story and message.

This author was reminded of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Commission, which was commissioned by the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. to discover a way forward from the conflict of the ordination of gay, lesbian, and transgendered people that is plaguing

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<sup>37</sup> John P. Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). 11.

the church. The church invited a group of respected lay elders, pastors, and professors to dialogue about the biblical issues. A majority of their work was spent on building community, and as a result, although a common understanding was not reached, a common bond and a way forward was discerned and offered to the church. A large part of the way forward was the process of us building community and listening to Scripture, and the confessions and traditions of the Christian Church.

Certainly all of the books above espouse a theological viewpoint. However the theological foundation of this study comes from Karl Barth and his protégé Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Calvin, Barth and Reformed Theology*, by Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman, is an excellent source. The book points out the connections between Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian denomination, and Barth.

Barth identifies three characteristics of Calvin's exegesis. First is that Calvin assumes the unity of the message of the Bible. Even though there may be differences, or disparities, he assumes that they all seek to say the same thing. Second, Calvin is careful to listen to the whole, not just the parts. Third, that the Bible is always relevant to the person reading it.<sup>38</sup> These are very important tenets of interpretation that Barth and Calvin held. Both Calvin and Barth believed that the Holy Scriptures were the Word of God, although Barth had a more nuanced view.

"Early on in the institutes, Calvin discusses the word of God as Holy Scripture (institutes. I. VI), and Barth is clear that 'We believe in and with the church that Holy Scripture as the original and legitimate witness of divine revelation is itself the word of

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<sup>38</sup> Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman, *Calvin, Barth and Reformed Theology*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2008). 167.

God.””<sup>39</sup> Both however recognized the important relationship of the church community and Scripture. “For both Calvin and Barth, we arrive at the view of Scripture as God’s word through the testimony of the Spirit to the church and in our own lives.... And it is Scripture which calls forth the church and not the church which creates the Canon.”<sup>40</sup>

Justin S. Holcomb, in his book *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, describes the theologies of seventeen important giants in the Christian faith. He looks at each within their own time period and devotes a chapter each on Calvin and Barth. He points out their understanding of the sovereignty of God. Holcomb notes that “The locus of biblical inspiration and authority for Barth is therefore not the text per se, but rather the gracious action of God, who determines when and where the human word becomes the bearer of the divine word.”<sup>41</sup>

Two books, one by Gabriel Fackre entitled *The Doctrine of Revelation*, and the next by Carl E. Braaten entitled *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, both approach scriptural inspiration from the viewpoint of the evangelical movement. Fackre is particularly interested in Carl Henry and his approach to scriptural inspiration. “The six-volume *God, Revelation, and Authority* is a magisterial treatment an evangelical idiom of the doctrine of revelation. Volume 4 is the heart of Henry’s investigation of the inspiration of Scripture and its core relate the concept of biblical ‘inerrancy.’”<sup>42</sup> Fackre defines scriptural inspiration and therefore his understanding of the doctrine of revelation.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 169.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). 190.

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel J. Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation*, Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997). 154.

He says revelation is “a supernatural influence upon divinely chosen prophets and apostles whereby the spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation. Historic evangelical Christianity considers the Bible, the essential revealed truth and verbal form.”<sup>43</sup> Fackre goes on to identify individual Scripture sentences to support this understanding of inspiration and interpretation.

Most of Fackre’s book is devoted to the doctrine of Revelation from the viewpoint of different theologians. He reviews the different topics and compares and contrasts their views. He arranges his book in three parts, General Revelation, Special Revelation, and Revelation at Reception.

Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Johnson edited a book called *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*.<sup>44</sup> The book originated from addresses delivered at a theological conference. The conference was co-sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. Most of the speakers addressed the gap between the historical-critical method in the church’s interpretation of biblical faith. The authors come from the perspective that the historical critical method is not as helpful as once thought. The book seems to be somewhat of a defense of a particular viewpoint rather than a discussion of the topic. In the chapter by Karl Donfried entitled “Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture,” Donfried uses an examination of Leviticus 18:6-23 and 20:13 to discuss how people have misappropriated the Scriptures. Half of the professors, pastors, and other Christians cannot share his interpretation. Rather than discussing community Scripture reading and interpretation, the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995).



article was a defense of one viewpoint. Overall, this book was not helpful with the research for this paper. There are assumptions made that are different from those made by this project's author. First of all, it is believed that God is still speaking through the Scripture to God's people. God is still speaking new revelation to God's people through understanding those who wrote the text and understanding of their situation; by looking at the text through the eyes of Jesus, through understanding the text by studying the history of its interpretation. In other words, the historical critical method is important though not always essential.

The texts that have been reviewed are all about communities of faith listening to God through reading Scripture and discerning God's mission or vision for them. Two particular communities of faith were studied. It was interesting to discover that even 1500 years before Christ communities of faith read and interpreted Scripture, especially when faced with a new situation. It helped them in discerning a new direction, but perhaps even more important brought them joy.

Current scholars writing on the situation of the church today also write about the central importance of communal Scripture reading and study in discerning a direction or call. It was refreshing to read of how equally important community and scriptural interpretation is to any listening and discerning of God's will. So, many times, "correct" interpretation is all that counts. Too many times the Scriptures are used as weapons to support one viewpoint or another; or a word is taken out of context; or they are not approached as the vessel of God's word; or the entirety of the Bible is not taken into account. Too many times communities are divisive, do not support each other in love, do

not care for each other or provide for those in need. In these circumstances the community is not able to hear a word from the Lord to them.

It would be possible to write volumes on each of the topics of Christian community, Scripture reading, and interpretation. The hot topic today in Christian circles centers around biblical interpretation, the idea being that one person could possess “the” correct interpretation and so offer direction or the understanding of God’s will. It seems in the examples of the faith communities in Nehemiah, Acts, and Germany, more than correct interpretation were needed. Let us explore this topic of communal Scripture reading and missional call in more detail.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Historical Foundation**

The hypothesis of this project is that communal practice of placing Scripture at the center of the church will help the church gain a deeper connection with God and community. It is hoped that this will help the people of the church to be clear about their mission and focused in living it out.

Two important historical communities of faith going through a time of transformation provide two good examples to examine. The people in these situations are faced with dramatic changes in circumstance. They need to find their way forward to hear God's missional call. These examples come from the Holy Scriptures, which are the story of God's people. The Holy Scriptures have been handed to us today as a complete canon of Old and New Testaments. They contain the long history of God and God's people. Much can be learned from the stories as they relate to each other and to us.

The first example is from the story of the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is a part of the story of the rebuilding of the Temple by the people who returned from exile in Babylon. At the center of the story is the reading and study of God's word, of the study of the Torah. It is about the communal reading, interpretation, and understanding of the Torah by the people.

The second example comes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. It is also a story about a beginning, this time the beginning of the Christian church and the transformation of the people of God. The death of Christ and the destruction of the Temple are still in people's minds. The resurrection of Christ, who fulfilled the law and the prophets, along with the Holy Scriptures become the foundation, study, prayer, and model and formation of the people of God. The New Testament passage Acts 2:42-47 describes the important elements of a new community of people of God, a Christian community.

These two communities of people faced new circumstances. They had a desire to find a way forward as people of God. Slifers Presbyterian, as do many mainline churches, finds itself in a whole new situation as well. Let us examine the historical, biblical, and theological examples of the story of God's People in Nehemiah and in Acts.

“In some respects—Nehemiah is the Old Testament equivalent of the Acts of the Apostles—it is a book of new beginnings. Acts opens with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by God, and the author cites Joel to (Acts 1:4-5; 2:16- 21, 33) the fulfillment of “the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah” (Ezra 1:1) launches Ezra – Nehemiah. The Book of Acts selectively narrates the early history of the church through the work of Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul. Here the reestablishment of the people of God after the exile is presented in a series of events associated with the names of Sheshbazaar, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> 147 p. 147 p. 147 p. 147 p. 147 p. 147 p. 147 p. 147 p. “On the basis of archaeological findings, including Egyptian and Persian texts from the same time, Historical–critical scholarship generally affirms that most of

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<sup>1</sup>Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 1st ed., Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).76

the events, persons, and problems depicted in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah are historical, although the presentation of these events, persons, and problems is colored by the perspectives and limited knowledge of the authors and/or editors of the material.”<sup>2</sup>

This is an important time in Biblical history. It is an important turning point for the people of God. The people of Judah had been captured by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 597. Many of the people who were captured were also taken to Babylonia. Then the Temple, the place where they believed YHWH lived, the place to which they had long brought sacrifices and worshiped God was destroyed. Psalm 137 expresses the feelings of anguish that the people felt.

Cyrus of Persia captured Babylon and in 538 issued an edict that allowed the Judeans to return home. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 445 and Ezra the priest returned around the same time. The people began to build their homes as they were able. They needed to rebuild their homes, the Temple, and their lives. After having lived in exile there was hope for a future yet at the same time they remembered Babylon.

There are already a few histories in the Bible covering this time period. And so, a person might wonder why Ezra-Nehemiah was included in the canon. Upon close examination, Chronicles uses a traditional set of lenses to view and describe the history covered in Ezra-Nehemiah. Temple worship is still important, as is the understanding of Davidic King, and the worship through sacrifice. Ezra-Nehemiah looks at the reforms begun with the law placed in the hearts of the people as Jeremiah taught. It signals the beginning of a new relationship with God. It probably marks the time of the earliest beginnings of the synagogue. Though there is no convincing evidence that the synagogues existed at that time, there were “houses of prayer.” “In some Egyptian

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<sup>2</sup> Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*. 21.

inscriptions from the third and second centuries B.C.E. there are mentions of a ‘place of prayer’ but we do not know what went on in the houses of prayer and it is not certain that these refer to synagogues.”<sup>3</sup>

The period of history that the book covers is the return from the exile of the people of Israel. King Darius issues the edict of Cyrus, which allows the people to return to Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are concerned with the rebuilding of the Temple, to repopulate Jerusalem and to reconnect the people with the Torah or essentially with God. At the beginning of each stage Nehemiah claims that God had put the task into his heart (2:12; 7:5).<sup>4</sup>

In other words the work of transformation of renewal began with God. The people have returned to a land and temple that was destroyed. They were distraught and even felt that their capture by the Babylonians and destruction of the temple and land had something to do with their unfaithfulness to YHWH. They felt a need to return to God. The people, men and women, and the Levites gathered together. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law.

“Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding.”<sup>5</sup> The two most important messages that Nehemiah wants the reader to understand is that the people are returning to place the book of the law in the center of their lives, and secondly, that the reading, hearing, studying, and understanding of the law by the people is an important part of their renewal, reconnecting with God, and refocusing their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1985. 1007.

<sup>4</sup> Allen and Laniak, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford University Press, Nehemiah 8:2a.

The beginning of chapter 8 shows the story of the people's encounter with growth and understanding. After hearing the book of the law read to them, the people take the "initiative as they request Ezra to bring the law, unity (Nehemiah 8:1 ['as one']); attentiveness (8:3B); foresight (8:4 [by remaining in their places]); contrition (8:9 [in their weeping]); obedience (8:12; cf. 8:10); understanding (8:12); and ultimately joy (8:12)."<sup>6</sup> It seems as though Ezra and the Levites are the sole leaders and teachers of the Torah when in fact the people play a large part as a community in its interpretation and practice.

"Not surprisingly, the book's most frequent use of the Hebrew word for 'people' is here in Nehemiah 8 where in its eighteen verses it occurs fifteen times, all but twice in the first dozen verses."<sup>7</sup> Nehemiah seems to want to emphasize the role of the people in the rebuilding.

In addition it is the Torah and each other's interpretation that the people are listening to. They are not listening to Ezra or the Levites. Ezra is simply the servant of the God who is reading.

"The seven references to the community suggest that it, rather than Ezra, is the focus of attention at this point. The verbs used confirm this surmise. Both figure as the subject of two distinct verbs: all the people 'gather....' The similarities between the

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<sup>6</sup> Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b-10:40) : An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study*. 120.

<sup>7</sup> Davies and others, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. 115.

people's directive and Ezra's action indicate that Ezra is the servant who mediates the introduction of the book of the law to the people."<sup>8</sup>

It seems that the study of the people in the time of Nehemiah is similar to today and that the study of the Scriptures are Spirit led. The situation or context of the reader, the Scripture itself, and the Holy Spirit come together, and in that manner the understanding of the word of God is possible.

The renewal in the events of Joshua's generation is similar to that of Nehemiah and to that of the house churches in Acts and of Christians today. The Scriptures are at the center of that transformation.

"Focus on the book of the law (18:13, 18) aligns the celebration of Booths with the events of Joshua's generation. Adherence to 'the book of the law' (8:13, 18; cf. Joshua 8:34-35) provides a common denominator between the 'children of Israel' who entered the land and renewed the covenant at Shechem. Under Joshua (Joshua 8:30-35; 24:1-28) 'the children of Israel' returned to the land from exile and celebrated the Festival of Booths under Ezra and the other leaders (Nehemiah 8:13-18)."<sup>9</sup>

This period of history marks a shift in the relationship with God. The people return from exile to a land in ruin. They are devastated, and their response is to desire a new relationship with God. They participate in the understanding and interpretation of Scripture; there is also a movement led by Ezra. This is to ensure that the Tribe of Judah continues and is not melded into the Babylonians. Another time of transformation is the twenty or thirty years after Jesus' death.

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<sup>8</sup> Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b-10:40) : An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study*. 85-86.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 136.



The Book of Acts is obviously written with the purpose of telling the story of the beginning of the Christian Church. An important and interesting part of this story is the particular circumstances in which the church found itself. The book covers approximately thirty years of time in twenty-eight chapters, or about a chapter per year. Some chapters cover only a single day's events, others a year of events. Luke has obviously carefully chosen what to include in "The Acts of the Apostles." For example, very little is said about the Twelve Apostles whereas Philip, who is not one of the Twelve, figures large in the book.<sup>10</sup>

Luke, in his description of the beginning of the church, wants to tell about two important factors. They are God, and God's people, in particular the Holy Spirit and the people of God. Luke emphasizes that it is really God who is the chief actor. The unfolding of the church is mostly described by Luke as the work of the Holy Spirit, which is viewed as God's powerful presence active in human affairs.<sup>11</sup> "As Luke's Gospel ended with a commissioning and a promise of empowerment by God, Acts began with the same. The risen Christ said to his disciples, '...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 12:8).'"<sup>12</sup> The Holy Spirit will come to the people of God and guide this listening people in its work to build God's Church. "Luke is convinced that God's redemption of the world and renewal of its life continues

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<sup>10</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Yrigoyen, *Acts for Our Time*. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 5.

through... the Church. There is nothing casual or accidental in its growth and progress; ...the Church advances irresistibly in the power of the Spirit”.<sup>13</sup>

However, the Church, which had begun with a vision of the power of God and with the great hope that the advance of its mission would lead to the fulfillment of God’s promises,... found itself in a serious conflict both with the Roman Empire and with the surrounding culture and civilization.<sup>14</sup> The Sanhedrin and Rome opposed Jesus even before the story in Acts begins. The opposition continued with the beginning of the Church, the martyrdom of Stephen, Paul’s troubles with the Roman authorities at the Areopagus, and his being mocked by the wise.<sup>15</sup>

A division within the Judean community developed over the course of time of those who continued to worship in the traditional manner, and the followers of Christ who accepted even Gentiles into their membership. “There seems to be a tremendous emphasis in Acts on the change-over from a Church that was mainly a little sect within the Jewish nation to a Church scattered over the Roman Empire and a largely gentile membership.”<sup>16</sup>

Luke emphasizes the important challenges the Christian communities faced while living in the midst of adversity and that the challenges evoked questions of identity. They asked themselves, who are we? Are we part of the culture or are we like the Romans, or the culture we find ourselves in?

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>14</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Balmer H. Kelly and Donald G. Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary* (Richmond,: John Knox Press, 1959). Vol. 20. 13.

Much of the life and culture within these cities were in opposition to the message of Jesus Christ. Paul even preached a sermon at the Areopagus pointing out the many idols the people had; in Ephesus there was a riot. “The Roman authorities were generally open to various religious beliefs but did not tolerate anything which threatened ‘peace’ in the cities. The style of life that Christians proposed and followed was not that of society at large.”<sup>17</sup>

Justo Gonzalez explains how the Roman Empire and its emphasis on the city changed the very fabric of life especially for the poor and those living in rural areas. The emphasis placed on city life, and the concentration of wealth amongst the senators and the aristocracy created a larger and larger gulf between those classes.

“The date in which Christianity begins to make its way in the world coincides with the time of greatest glory for the Roman Empire. As every empire must do, the Roman Empire justified its existence on the basis of an ideology. In its case, this was the ideology of Rome as a civilizing agent. The very word ‘civilization’<sup>18</sup> comes from the same root as ‘city’; and the manner in which the Romans understood their civilizing task was precisely the citification of the world.” The city culture, the wealthy senators, artisans, and others grew in prestige while the slave class and people living in rural communities became even poorer.

While the first centuries of the Christian era witnessed the progressive disappearance of the farms that had been the foundation of the ancient Roman Republic, the senatorial families and other members of the aristocracy amassed ever increasing

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<sup>17</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 10.

extensions of land.<sup>19</sup> “This was made even worse because the rich and the powerful paid little or no taxes, while the fiscal burden fell mostly on peasants and laborers.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet even in the midst of the conflict with the Roman Government and the surrounding culture, the extreme poverty of those living in the city, and the pulling away from synagogue and Temple Worship, Luke emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit in the shaping, identity, and formation of the church. He doesn’t doubt for a moment that God will accomplish the task at hand. Luke describes the vehicle through which God intends to accomplish the task. He describes the community of God which practices listening to the Scripture, breaking bread together, praying, and sharing its resources.

One could trace back the beginnings of the Christian Church to the synagogues. Though it cannot be stated for certain, during the “Diaspora” the Jewish faith began to spread to surrounding areas. Eventually synagogues were in all the important cities. Those Jews who were scattered abroad exercised a significant influence of Jewish faith. They translated the Scripture into Hebrew.<sup>21</sup>

One can only imagine when it was that the synagogue became a place of worship. The diaspora was a slow but steady process possibly beginning with the Babylonian exile. Over the next several hundred years people from Judah made their homes in almost all Greek and Roman cities. There is some evidence that the synagogues grew out of the time of the exile. Certainly they were influenced by the time of separation from the Temple. The passage in Nehemiah that is a Biblical foundation for this paper shows that the people studied Scripture. The book of the law was not only read by the priest and not

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (1985). 221.

only in the Temple but also by the people who read and interpreted it. “The reading of Scripture was clearly a central component, probably *the* central component of the Sabbath gathering in the ‘synagogue’.... The purpose of the Torah reading was to impart knowledge, gain an understanding of how God had acted in the past towards his people and to advance in piety’.”<sup>22</sup> This emphasis of reading and study of the Scripture happened in the early house churches as well.

The synagogue was the perfect place for Paul to seek converts to the Christian faith. The synagogue was a place where Scriptures were read and discussed, where people prayed together, and often times where a meal was shared. Paul was a Pharisee and a teacher of the law.

In addition to the synagogue, businesses and associations provided opportunities for Paul to teach. People were accustomed to meeting in small groups and large groups. They would prove to be helpful in providing a larger audience. For example, “There were associations before like “The Association in the Home of Sergius Paulus.... An interesting example of a voluntary association is the Dionysian association of Thiasos, founded by Pompeia Agrippinilia. We have what appears to be a membership list of this club, with some 400 names.”<sup>23</sup>

These business and voluntary groups provided opportunities for Paul to preach and for him to be heard. In addition many people were already seeking to know more about religious practice and thought as it was talked about in the marketplace.

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<sup>22</sup> Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue : A Critical Analysis of Current Research*. 123.

<sup>23</sup> Vincent P. Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, Zacchaeus Studies. New Testament (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1989). 48.

“Luke describes Paul in dramatic contact with these associations, in conflict with Artemis guild in Ephesus (Acts 19:24-27), preaching to the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:18), using the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (Acts 19:9).”<sup>24</sup>

We know from the Book of Acts that when Paul entered a new city to preach the Gospel, he first visited the synagogues ... and apparently stayed in Jewish homes and practiced his trade as a tentmaker.<sup>25</sup> Paul was a Roman citizen and a Pharisee, converted from Judaism. He was trained in the Scriptures and very familiar with the synagogues. Whenever he entered the city, now a Christian, he would go to the synagogue and teach. Here he would also teach about Jesus Christ, how he was the Messiah, the one who fulfilled the Scriptures, and the promises of God. It was out of this teaching that others came to know and believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the son of God.

Paul would invariably convert some of the aristocracy to the “way.” The people who were wealthy were an important part of the new Christian communities. Often the homes of a rich “patron” became the sight of a house church. There were few people who had the resources to own a house and who could provide space for people to meet.

Three percent of the population occupied one third of the residential space in Rome; the rest lived in tenements called *insulae*.<sup>26</sup> “Thus the average population density in the cities in the Empire equaled the density of the industrial slums in Modern Western cities, and 200 persons per acre.”<sup>27</sup> “This is the Rome of A.D. 57, where small groups of believers met to pray and share table fellowship celebrating the risen Christ. Many of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Finger, *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation*.26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

them were slaves or lower-class freed persons; and most could not read. A few were middle or upper class; some may have been upwardly mobile slaves working in imperial households.”<sup>28</sup> An average room rented for about 40 denarii a month. Since a common laborer’s wage was generally one denarius families had to share space. In a word, the poor of the Jerusalem community were not ‘the other’ but rather the majority of the community.<sup>29</sup>

A patron converted to the “way” would invite (as would new members) people from the community, many of whom were poor, to meet and form a house church or Ecclesia. The new Christians would begin to meet in homes together. They would share a meal together, read letters from Paul, and worship. “In the earliest days the Christians met together every day, and their worship was spontaneous. This seems to have been regarded as the ideal, for when Paul describes how a church meeting should proceed, he depicts a spirit led participation in worship by many, if not all members of the church.”<sup>30</sup>

Luke characterizes the important aspects of the early church as teaching, prayers, fellowship, and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42). “In the first century, bread and wine were basic food and drink. The breaking of the one and the drinking of the other customarily marked the beginning and the conclusion of a meal. When the Lord’s Supper commenced with the breaking of bread and ended with the drinking of wine, it was not a separate ritual but an ordinary meal given extraordinary significance.”<sup>31</sup> Many of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*. vii.

<sup>30</sup> John William Drane, *Early Christians*, 1st U.S. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982). 74.

<sup>31</sup> Robert J. Banks and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998). 46.

house churches were in the poor areas of the cities. The meals that were provided in many cases were not just symbolic but were meals to sustain those who were poor. These meals were a large part of the way that these house churches cared for its members. The meals shared sustained them and also bound them together as a community.

The Christian movement's communities were characterized by a well-practiced commitment to mutual regard and assistance. This regard and help assumed many forms. Christians were expected to care for and take care of each other. They provided hospitality to each other, especially when receiving travelers. They nursed each other when they were sick. They provided food when others were hungry. They provided charitable assistance when others were economically distressed. Rather than cause animosity between one another, they forgave each other's debts.<sup>32</sup>

These communities not only cared for their members but they also took up offerings to support churches that were far away. Paul gives instructions which he also gave the Galatians that each person, on the first day on the week, is to "set aside and keep whatever he has succeeded in, so there need be no collections when I come" (1 Cor 16:2). The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea. We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others (2 Cor 8:20-21).

John Calvin wrote about Luke's statement in Acts 2:44 that "All who believed were together and had all things in common." Luke said that "Whence we gather that which I said even now, that they brought forth and made common their goods in no other

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<sup>32</sup> Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime, *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002). 236.



respect save only that they might relieve the present necessity.”<sup>33</sup> Most scholars suggest, as John Calvin did, that the community cared for the necessary needs of its members, but that they retained their individual possessions. “There is no reason for doubting the general accuracy of Luke’s account at this point. The sharing of goods was nothing new, and was regarded as an idea by Greek writers, while Jews were well aware of the need to be charitable.”<sup>34</sup>

There is another example of the practice of individuals giving their possessions for the good of the community. It was in the life and practice of the Qumran community. They also met in smaller groups of believers who worshiped together and cared for each other, except they didn’t have to give up all their possessions until a year after they joined the group. “These Essenes outside Qumran apparently lived and assembled in private homes. Josephus refers to a “house” where they met for meals and instructions. Philo refers to them sharing their houses. Such home-based communities would be close parallels to the Christian house churches.”<sup>35</sup>

These new ecclesia had little structure, which allowed for greater participation, and at the same time a greater dependence on the Holy Spirit’s leading. Professor Ernst Kaesemann... concludes that there was no bureaucracy as such. People’s usefulness in the church was determined directly by his or her endowment with the Spirit. Even the Apostles had no authority only in so far as the Holy Spirit gave it to them. John Dane points out that Kasemann’s opinion concerning structure and bureaucracy in the early church is agreed upon by many others such as Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic theologian,

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<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Drane, *Early Christians*. 69.

<sup>35</sup> Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*. House Church. 46.

and Hendricus Berkh, a Dutch theologian. This conclusion supports Paul's understanding of leadership as Spirit led, that each has been given a gift of the Spirit and is to use his or her gift for the up building of the church, that leaders are not leaders through some formal act, but by the Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

These believers in Jesus were radically different, however, from their fellow Jews because of their enthusiastic consciousness of the Spirit; this was the Spirit of God to be poured out at the end of times, which brought the gift of tongues and prophecy, worked miracles, and granted the assurance that they belonged to God's elect people.<sup>37</sup>

Paul the apostle and others had some amazing good news to share, as Luke indicates in our passage, Acts 2:43. "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles." Beyond that there were other important circumstances and situations in the formation of the Christian church. The Jewish people who attended the synagogues were well-versed in the Scriptures. Indeed, the Scriptures were studied regularly and provided a good example for the fledgling Christian church to follow.

The new converts met in people's homes, broke bread, prayed together, shared meals together, and cared for each other in spite of the fact that the majority of the people were very poor. There were patrons who offered the upper rooms of their houses as meeting places. It was an intimate way of learning about the love and redemption of Jesus Christ. Through the communal study of Scripture, the life of Jesus Christ, and the letters of Paul, the people gained a new understanding of God's relationship with them.

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<sup>36</sup> Drane, *Early Christians*. 70.

<sup>37</sup> Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995). 95.

## Biblical Foundation

### Old Testament Nehemiah 8:13-8

<sup>13</sup> On the second day the heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to the scribe Ezra in order to study the words of the law. <sup>14</sup> And they found it written in the law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the people of Israel should live in booths<sup>1</sup> during the festival of the seventh month, <sup>15</sup> and that they should publish and proclaim in all their towns and in Jerusalem as follows, “Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm and other leafy trees to make booths,<sup>1</sup> as it is written.” <sup>16</sup> So the people went out and brought them, and made booths<sup>1</sup> for themselves, each on the roofs of their houses, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. <sup>17</sup> And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths<sup>1</sup> and lived in them; for from the days of Jeshua son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. <sup>18</sup> And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the festival seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.<sup>38</sup>

Though they are two separate books few are as close as Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament. They really should be looked upon as one book as they are interrelated. Modern readers of the Old Testament think of two books, however, the MT (Masoretic Text), the standard text of the Hebrew Bible, regards it as one literary text—noting, for instance, that Nehemiah 3:32 is the middle verse of the book and that the LXX (the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) also treated Ezra and Nehemiah

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<sup>38</sup> Oxford University Press., *The Holy Bible : Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books : New Revised Standard Version*, New Revised Standard pocket ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

as a single work.<sup>39</sup> One could almost not exist with the other. It cannot be determined when they were written or by whom they were written. Some believe that Ezra-Nehemiah was written following Chronicles. It seems that they are a continuation of the book of Second Chronicles because it ends with the Edict of Cyrus and Ezra, and Nehemiah begins with it. In fact, according to recent scholarship this is not true and the traditional Hebrew ordering of the books which places Ezra-Nehemiah before the book of Chronicles fits better.<sup>40</sup>

The writer treats the book like history. However many scholars do not think of this text as history but rather in terms of a history related literature. This is because of the inconsistencies within the text. For example, it is difficult to date when Ezra arrived from Babylon. Scholars are quite confident that Nehemiah's return from exile occurred in 445 B.C.E. The traditional view places Ezra before Nehemiah, with the former arriving from Babylon in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. If Artaxerxes was the first of that name (465-424) the date would be 458 B.C.E. But discrepancies make some scholars suspect it was Artaxerxes II (404–360), so that Ezra's return would have been in 398 B.C. E., after Nehemiah's.<sup>41</sup>

Johanna Van Wijk-Bos points to the mix-up with the numbers and names of the rulers of Persia as evidence that Ezra-Nehemiah is not in chronology. The writers were neither confused nor were they trying to confuse others. They were not interested in exact

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<sup>39</sup> Allen and Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: Based on the New International Version*. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament : The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). 364.

<sup>41</sup> Davies and others, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. x.

dates rather they were interested in the realities of their time.<sup>42</sup> Although we may appreciate a text that is consistent as we would like it to be, what is important is the interpretation and understanding of the faithful, led by the Spirit.

Ezra-Nehemiah begins with the return of the exiles from Babylon. A general outline of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is as follows. First Ezra builds an altar under the reign of Cyrus and then a Temple under Darius (Ezra 1:7–6:22). Second he builds up the community during the reign of Artaxerxes reign (Ezra 7:1–10:44). Third, he proceeds in restoring the city wall under Artaxerxes, (Nehemiah 1:1 to 7:25) “then the festival of booths or Sukkoth is celebrated twice, in Ezra 3 and Nehemiah 8.”<sup>43</sup>

Van Wijk-Bos calls this last section the “restoration of the community by means of the interpretation and application of the Torah.”<sup>44</sup>

Michael Duggan in his analysis further labels and details what takes place in Nehemiah 8 as a communal study. Chapter 8 begins with the reading of the Law by Ezra and it follows with a communal study. “(T)he second portion of the covenant renewal (8:13-18) is distinguished from both the first (7:70-8:12) and the third (9:1-10:40) in so far as it begins with communal ‘study’... By the leaders rather than public ‘reading’ to the whole assembly (... , 8:3, 8; 9:3; cf. 8:18).”<sup>45</sup>

Chapter 8 indeed tells the story of the restoration of the community by means of the interpretation and application of the Torah. In particular, this passage chosen as the

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<sup>42</sup> Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*. 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Davies and others, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. xxi.

<sup>44</sup> Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b-10:40) : An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study*. 125.

Old Testament foundation (Nehemiah 8:13-18) is about the communal reading, interpretation, and understanding of the Torah by the people.

Nehemiah 8:13-18 is at the height of the story of the effort to rebuild the community. In this passage the people are responding to, interpreting, and being shaped by the word of God in the Torah. It is not centered mainly on the leading of Ezra, as one can see by looking at the events that take place just prior to pericope in question. The people were not responding to the leadership of Ezra, rather they responded to the Torah.

Davis points out that in Ezra-Nehemiah no emissary of God speaks in the name of YHWH as Moses once did. In other words Ezra is not looked upon as the spokesman for God. The loss of that grace is made up of two virtual equivalences. That is, YHWH himself is the content of the Law, and a return to it is a return to him. The strength and alternation of emotions suggest that the Law and its construal are also paralleled. The people cried as they listened to the Law and rejoiced to have understood it (8:9, 12) although the first reaction of the people was to weep for their sins; a joyful celebration precedes the prayer of penance because the Law is a good gift. But divine authority must be explained and understood for it to give life.<sup>46</sup>

The people's understanding and reaction to the reading of the Law and the interpretation of the Law becomes a communal event. At first, as they listen, the people mourn for their unfaithfulness to YHWH but then as they began to understand the message they respond with joy.

Not only is the Torah central to the story, so are the people. "The role of the people stays central throughout this section and the one following. The centrality of the community to the proceedings is underlined by the repetition of the word 'people' or the

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<sup>46</sup> Davies and others, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. 115.

phrase ‘all the people,’ sometimes varied by ‘the men and the women and those who could understand,’ and the list of names and systems. In fact, only verse 10 lacks an explicit reference of this kind.”<sup>47</sup> Clearly the author wants us to realize the main actors in this passage are the people.

Chapter 8:13 begins with a second reading or study of the Torah. “On the second day the heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to the scribe Ezra in order to study the words of the law.”<sup>48</sup> Davies in his analysis again points out the central role of the people in the reading and interpretation of the Law. “There they discover the prescriptions for the Festival of Booths and the people, not Ezra, issue an edict for its general observation. Then on the twenty-fourth day of the month, the people assemble for a liturgy of fasting, reading, and confession without the mention of Ezra or Nehemiah (9:1-5). Their activity as a community institutes the readings of the scroll and then brings on a communal response to it in writing (Nehemiah 10).”<sup>49</sup>

The Festival of Booths they discovered is also called the Festival of Tabernacles, in Hebrew Sukkot, which was one of the three main festivals of the ancient Israelite community. The original connection of this festival is with agriculture rather than a people’s history.

In the Exodus and Deuteronomic (Deut 16:13-17, 31:9-13) accounts of the Festival of Booths the agricultural nature of this festival is clear. However gradually, the

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<sup>47</sup> Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Oxford University Press, *The Holy Bible*, Ezra 8:13.

<sup>49</sup> Davies and others, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. 115.

Israelite community transforms this into one that commemorated the sacred story of the escape of the slaves from Egypt and their journey through the wilderness under God's protection. The Booths were indicative of the temporary quality of the communities as they journeyed through the desert and at the same time indicative of God's guidance and presence. In Leviticus it speaks of God making "the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt" (Lv 23:43).<sup>50</sup>

These booths are temporary shelter built out of branches around harvest time, but later also along the road on the journey toward Cana. These "booths" perform a multiple function. They are a gathering place to deposit and sort the fruit; they provide shelter against the elements when necessary; and they can be the center for the workers together and have refreshment or a positive labor.<sup>51</sup>

The Festival of Booths is found in seven places in Scripture. By comparing the description found in verses 13 and 14 with those descriptions in other places in Scripture you can narrow down which Scripture text they were reading. The seventh month is only specified in Leviticus 23 and Numbers 29 while the command to dwell in booths and cut down tree branches occurs only in Leviticus 23, and the conclusion of the fast with a solemn assembly on the day is prescribed only Leviticus 23 and Numbers 29. So it must have been either Leviticus 23 or Numbers 29 that was being studied. Nevertheless, there were differences between Leviticus 23 and the references found in Nehemiah: 13-18.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*. 77.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther : Based on the Revised Standard Version*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids London: Eerdmans; Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984). 187.



The people reading and interpreting the Torah read with a listening ear for God's word for them as exiles. The leaders did not simply happen upon the relevant passage by chance. The expression "They found written" (Neh 8:14) describes the results of their perusing the text in search of a passage appropriate to the community's circumstances. Some suggest that an interpretation of Scripture by the people is evident within the text of this passage.

Duggan points to what he believes is evidence that adds to the interpretation of this passage as an excellent early example of communal Scripture reading, and interpretation by the people. He talks about a discrepancy between Nehemiah 8:14-15, and the Pentateuchal legislation on Booths. He asks, "is the quoted text ('Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm and other leafy trees to make booths' Neh 8:15b ) in the passage really 'as it is written'?" Duggan raises questions about the meaning of "as it is written" in 8:15. In fact the original Pentateuchal text and the way it is found in Nehemiah 8:15 are different, so it is actually not "as it is written." "The two basic alternatives that scholars have proposed to account for the differences are that either Ezra's Pentateuchal text was different from the MT, or that Ezra and the leaders were engaged in a Halakic interpretation of Leviticus 23:39-43."<sup>53</sup> Clines in his Commentary believes that in fact it was the second proposed difference, that people were engaged in interpretation of the text." All this may mean that Ezra's copy of Leviticus differed in minor points from our own, but the last item leads us to think that we are dealing here not with variant texts, but with a contemporary reinterpretation of the law.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b-10:40) : An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study*. 131.

<sup>54</sup> Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther : Based on the Revised Standard Version*. Ezra.187.

Duggan asks what then was their interpretation of the festival of booths? He offers seven explanations as to what was different. The last two he indicates are the most likely, “for the first time, the booths were symbolic of the Exodus rather than merely of the harvest; and (second) the Law of Moses, was the centerpiece of this festival, just as it had been when Joshua renewed the covenant at Shechem.”<sup>55</sup> Those two elements connected the people with their present situation. They were listening to the Law of Moses, searching for meaning, and found the Festival of Booths. It was the seventh month, and the festival had not been celebrated since the days of Joshua. They celebrated a renewed connection to God, being reminded of God’s faithfulness to the slaves in Egypt and to them. The God who liberated the people from Egypt and led them to the Promised Land was with them and would guide them until they reached the Promised Land.

Notice the order of events. (a)The people worship, (b) they hear the law read to them, (c) they interpret what they heard, and (d) their understanding is corrected and deepened with great joy. The people grow in their stead.<sup>56</sup> The book of Nehemiah is about renewal, indeed about a transformation of a people in exile. Chapter 8 tells the story of how this happened, of the process of returning to God and the importance of the study of the law by the people.

All the people along with the priests and Levites came to study the words of the law. This was a new thing for the people to study the Torah themselves, to interpret, and to recover something very important in their understanding of it. There they found written

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<sup>55</sup> Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah, (Neh 7:72b-10:40) : An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study*. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 121.

the story of the Festival of Booths. In it the Lord had commanded Moses that the people of Israel should live in booths during the festival of the seventh month. So they celebrated this festival of harvest joy. They remembered the Exodus and also their own exile. They also remembered their unfaithfulness to God that they believed was a part of its cause. In remembering the Exodus they were reconnecting to God's purpose for them for all of creation.

There is an interesting connection between the two pericopes that are the foundation of this paper. It was during this time period in Nehemiah that the foundation of worship in the synagogue was laid. Worship was possible away from the temple and the people could be involved in the interpretation of the Word of God. One connection to Acts 2:42-47 is that the synagogues were where Paul always went when he entered a new city. It is there that Paul met people and told them of Jesus Christ and, with those people who believed, formed Christian communities.

#### New Testament Acts 2:42-47

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds<sup>1</sup> to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home<sup>1</sup> and ate their food with glad and generous<sup>2</sup> hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.<sup>57</sup>

The Book of Acts is unique in the New Testament. It is neither, gospel, epistle, or apocalyptic in form. There is broad consensus that it is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke.

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<sup>57</sup> Oxford University Press., *The Holy Bible : Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books : New Revised Standard Version.*

Luke and Acts are essentially two volumes of a single work. This connection is shown in the dedication of both books to “Theophilus.”<sup>58</sup>

The author of Luke and therefore Acts is not known with any certainty. However there is a long tradition starting in the second century that it is “written by Luke the beloved physician” who sends greetings to the Colossians in one of Paul’s letters (Col 4:14; cf. Philemon 24; 2 Tim 4:11). This opinion is first expressed in the Muratorian Canon, a document from the second half of the second century, and its contemporary Irenaeus.”<sup>59</sup> The author of Acts knew Paul and traveled with him. He had firsthand knowledge of the growing fledgling church. “The ‘we’ passages in Acts are most likely referring to the author of Acts and Paul as companions on the journeys so described.”<sup>60</sup>

The Acts of the Apostles does not include dates to help in determining when it was written. However it has many references to the political, geographical, and historical events of the time. Perhaps it was written when Paul was still in prison awaiting trial, as it does not tell us the final outcome. If that is the case it would have been written sometime between 59-64 B.C.E.<sup>61</sup> However this is unlikely. The Book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke and so it must have been written some time later.

It is more likely that in Luke the author was aware that Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem had been fulfilled in 70.<sup>62</sup> It is also thought that Luke wrote

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<sup>58</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kelly and Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*., *Layman's Bible*, Vol. 20. 8-9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>62</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible* (New York,: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951).Vol. 9. 21.

some of the Book of Acts while traveling with Paul and so Justo Gonzalez sets the date at 80.<sup>63</sup> *The Layman's Bible Commentary* sets it after 70 but before 90<sup>64</sup> and *The Interpreter's Bible* sets the date at around 85.<sup>65</sup> The book was most likely completed by Luke before Paul's death in Rome, as there is no mention of any of the Epistles.<sup>66</sup> It also does not indicate what happened to Paul after his arrest. It has not been determined where Acts was completed but it traditionally is thought to have been completed in Antioch, Luke's hometown.

When comparing the various extant manuscripts of Acts, it is clear that the book has come to our time in two distinct versions or traditions. The one found in the majority of the more ancient manuscripts and the one which seems to be original is usually called the "Egyptian," "common," or "neutral" text. The other version is commonly called the "Western" text.<sup>67</sup> The author of this manuscript is using the NRSV which in general follows the Egyptian text.

Acts offers a description of the life and worship of the early Christians. From the brief summaries in its earlier chapters (for example, 2:42-47 and 4:32-35) we have a picture of the community. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

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<sup>63</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Kelly and Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*. *Layman's Bible*, Vol.20. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9. 22.

<sup>66</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

The theme that is emphasized here is perseverance, which is a strong connotation of the verb that the NRSV translates as “they devoted themselves.” This was a very important subject in Luke’s time, for by then it was becoming increasingly clear that the Christians would have serious clashes with the rest of society.<sup>68</sup> John Calvin in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles also points out the importance of their practice in confirming their faith.

The apostles as eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life were guardians of the truth. The importance of this was demonstrated when a replacement for Judas Iscariot was found. Peter stated that candidates for the position should be those who had accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry.<sup>69</sup> It was important that the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Christ be accurately taught and passed on. So it was thought that perseverance in study and learning must become one of the marks on the church if it is to be truly faithful, and to be able to move from fear to joy.<sup>70</sup>

“The (second) perseverance that leads from fear to joy was demonstrated by ‘fellowship’ (Koinonia) or even better sharing and solidarity.”<sup>71</sup> It is Paul’s favorite word to describe the unity of believers and with their Lord (1 Cor 1:9, Gal 2:9). “Verse 42: Elements of this may go back to tradition. Indeed, ‘fellowship’ (in the Greek Koinonia) does not appear elsewhere in Luke-Acts, and verse 42 is partly taken up again in verse

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<sup>68</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 50.

<sup>69</sup> Yrigoyen, *Acts for Our Time*. 24.

<sup>70</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 52.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

46. ... Here Luke has apparently reported the fellowship of the first Christians, their eating together, and their instruction by the apostles.”<sup>72</sup>

Few Greek words are as common among Christians today as is Koinonia. In some circles all claim to know the meaning of Koinonia as “fellowship,” however such a translation reflects only one of the many shades of meaning of this word, and perhaps not even the most important. In its common use in the daily life in the first century, Koinonia did not refer only to a good feeling or fellowship among friends. It also meant “corporation,” “common enterprise,” or “company.” It is similar to the way today we might say that Peter and John own a “company,” that they are “partners,” or that they have a corporation. There is no doubt that Koinonia is fellowship, but it is also solidarity and the sharing of feelings, goods, and actions.<sup>73</sup> “Its equivalent in Aramaic (habhuru) seems to have been in common use to describe a group of companions who shared a common life, particularly those who united to celebrate a common Passover meal.”<sup>74</sup>

John Calvin wrote about Luke’s statement in Acts 2:44. “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” He said that “Whence we gather that which I said even now, that they brought forth and made common their goods in no other respect, save only that they might relieve the present necessity.”<sup>75</sup> Most scholars suggest, as Calvin did, that the community cared for the necessary needs of its members, but that members retained their individual possessions. “There is no reason for doubting the

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<sup>72</sup> Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles : What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church*. 58.

<sup>73</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 50-51.

<sup>74</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*. *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9. 50.

<sup>75</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*. 131.

general accuracy of Luke's account at this point. The sharing of goods was nothing new, and was regarded as an idea by Greek writers, while Jews were well aware of the need to be charitable."<sup>76</sup>

This does not mean as is often thought that the members of Christian community gave all things they owned to the community to be distributed. "The verbs in this verse are in the imperfect, which means that they used to sell and they used to distribute resources. This implies a continued action done as "any had need."<sup>77</sup> In other words they were partners in a corporation through which they shared their resources as they were needed.

The early Christians met in synagogues all over the Roman Empire. They formed small communities and shared meals together, cared for each other, and learned and shared the stories of Christ. "Marshall rightly emphasizes communal meals in Acts as a continuation of Jesus' previous meals with his disciples, as well as a reflection of meal practices of other groups."<sup>78</sup>

The third aspect of the perseverance of those early Christians was in worship. Jesus also went regularly on a pilgrimage to the Temple, new was the Eucharist, and the Eucharistic celebration, a remembrance of the unparalleled event of the resurrection of Jesus, and the announcement of the equally great event of his return at the fulfillment of the Promise.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Drane, *Early Christians*. 69.

<sup>77</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. 51.

<sup>78</sup> Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*. 60.

<sup>79</sup> González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. Acts. 53.



The fourth element of the perseverance that Luke describes is prayer (2:42) or praise (2:47). This meant that the church attributed all that it was and all that it had to God.<sup>80</sup>

“It followed Jesus’ example in recognizing the significance of drawing near to God in this way.”<sup>81</sup> There are many instances in the Book of Acts that mention that the apostles or others took time to pray. There are nine references to individual or community prayer (Acts: 1:14, 3:1, 6:4, 8:22-24, 10:9, 14:23, 16:13, 16:16, 26:29). Prayer, not necessarily lead by the apostles or the Temple priests, certainly was important to the early Christians. “But once again the specifically Christian side of this devotional life would find its expression in family gatherings for prayer, and in the daily intercourse in the homes of members of the new community.”<sup>82</sup>

Luke added a few more characteristics to his brief sketch (2:43-47). He said that a sense of awe, or reverence for God, was present in every believer, especially in light of the wonders and signs that God accomplished among the members of the community.<sup>83</sup>

The expression “those being saved” in verse 47b echoes the last phrase of Joel 3:5 quoted in 2:21.<sup>84</sup> Reading, interpreting, and communicating the message of the Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, that he was the messiah spoken of in the Torah, by prophets and in writings, was a main purpose of the new communities of Christ followers. This

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>81</sup> Yrigoyen, *Acts for Our Time*. 27.

<sup>82</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible. Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9. 51.

<sup>83</sup> Yrigoyen, *Acts for Our Time*. 28.

<sup>84</sup> Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles : What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church*. 57.

needed to take place in a community of believers. A community who intensely cared for each other, ate together, prayed together, and watched out for each other.

Many scholars believe that this description of the early Christian community described the way Luke hoped it would be. "... Luke throws a highly favorable light on the primitive church of Jerusalem. He presents a utopian portrait of the Jerusalem community and at the same time recalls Greek ethical ideals."<sup>85</sup> It is apparent in the writings and letters of Paul that many communities indeed fell short of living together in this manner. It is however obvious that precisely this kind of community was essential for Christianity to grow and flourish in that particular time. The elements described in Acts 2:42-47 are so described because they are the model. Teaching, fellowship, prayers, breaking bread, having things in common, and faith, all took place in the many burgeoning Christian communities.

### **Theological Foundation**

An important aspect of this project is the relation regarding community, Scripture, and revelation. Karl Rahner, a preeminent Catholic theologian, believes that the church is the body of Christ and Christ is the word made flesh so inexplicably that people are related to Jesus Christ, and the people are inseparable from the word which is communicated to us. There is a definite line of continuity between Christ, Bible, and

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

church–incarnation, inspiration, and illumination. The question is who and how they are related.<sup>86</sup>

Many Christian theologians would agree with Rahner. The answer to Rahner’s question is central to this project. Scripture in the Catholic Church is especially revelatory. The dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican Council II says, “Our holy mother the church holds the complete books of the old and the new Testaments, with all their parts, to be sacred and canonical. Four, written under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration... They are authored by God and have been handed on to the church as such.”<sup>87</sup>

Gabriel Fackre, in his book *The Doctrine of Revelation*, notes that the Catholic Church states that in Scripture, God spoke to man in a human way, and that its interpretation is entrusted to the church’s magisterium, whose authority is wielded in the name of Jesus Christ. Both inspiration and illumination in the teaching office of the church are important in scriptural interpretation. The Catholic Church speaks of the incarnation as the most important disclosure of God. It the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God.<sup>88</sup>

Fackre himself approaches scriptural inspiration from the viewpoint of the evangelical movement. He is particularly interested in Carl Henry and his approach to scriptural inspiration. “The six-volume *God, Revelation, and Authority* is a magisterial treatment and Evan Jellicoe idiom of the doctrine of revelation. Volume 4 is the heart of Henry’s investigation of the inspiration of Scripture and its correlate, the concept of

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<sup>86</sup> Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation*. 194.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 187

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 187-188.

biblical ‘inerrancy.’”<sup>89</sup> Fackre goes on to define scriptural inspiration and therefore his understanding of the doctrine of revelation. He says it is “a supernatural influence upon divinely chosen prophets and apostles where by the spirit of God assures the truth and trustworthiness of their oral and written proclamation. Historic evangelical Christianity considers the Bible, the essential revealed truth and verbal form.”<sup>90</sup> The evangelical understanding of Scripture is that it is inherent, and as a sacred document contains the Word of God.

The answer adopted by this project is in the reformed tradition. It is that of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was heavily influenced by Karl Barth. “While Barth assumes that the Bible means what it says, he understands this in a way that contrasts with the view of biblical literalists. As Hans Frei has observed, Barth reads the Bible as a kind of realistic narrative whose history-likeness does not ensure the historical likelihood of its stories,”<sup>91</sup> which is to say the use of Historical Critical methods of interpretation in and of themselves will not reveal the Word of God. However it is an important tool in understanding this divine yet human document. “Barth is at pains to defend historical criticism, but always insists that it must serve the larger goal of listening to Scripture to hear God speak.”<sup>92</sup>

Barth understands the Holy Scriptures to be *sacred* Scriptures, but that at the same time they are thoroughly human compositions. They are therefore fallible and subject to biblical criticism. In Barth’s view one must read Scripture in a dialectical manner in

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<sup>89</sup> Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation*. 154-155.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>91</sup> Tiffany and Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap*. 189.

<sup>92</sup> MacDonald and Trueman, *Calvin, Barth and Reformed Theology. Calvin*. 170.

debate and comparisons. Whether God is revealing his Word depends entirely on the working of the Spirit in the exercise.

“Karl Barth’s interpretation of the Bible as an instrumentality through which God sporadically communicates his paradoxical Word.... redefines the doctrine of inspiration dynamically and connects it with the psyche of the believer.... Scripture for Barth is a fallible witness through which God personally encounters the trusting reader or here... for Barth, Scripture is not truly the word of God, but becomes the word of God only in some mysterious divine confrontation. The Bible plays only an instrumental role in relation to revelation; it is the framework through which God’s voice may be heard.”<sup>93</sup>

Barth continues saying that ultimately revelation is a divine decision; is God’s decision through the Holy Spirit. God established the church and the initiative of God continues giving life to the church. In addition, just as the church is connected to the body of Christ, which is both holy and divine, so too is the word of God. The Bible is not a static deposit into our lives, but rather is a living continuing witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. “Barth believed that Holy Scripture would in fact answer the most important human questions, but that for this goal to be realized, we would have to allow the Bible to clarify our questions, and not the reverse.”<sup>94</sup>

Revelation of God’s Word occurs as a result of God’s desire that can be understood through the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Community. In the Roman Catholic understanding the community that has the authority to interpret Scripture is the Magisterium.

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<sup>93</sup> Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation*. 159.

<sup>94</sup> Tiffany and Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap*. 195.

In the reformed tradition revelation comes from God and the Christian community is the body of Christ and is the seat of Scriptural interpretation. This is the foundation of this author's work in this paper.

The priesthood of all believers is a doctrine that relates specifically to the responsibility of each member of the community in interpreting Scripture. "The individual and the community are to be invited into the task of theological reflection. At least two points are implied in the statement, reflecting an assumption among several theologians we have considered. One is that all the participants in the community of faith are to seek to relate God's purpose to life. All are to 'do theology.'" <sup>95</sup>

Not only is it important for each person to take on the responsibility of reading and interpreting the Scriptures, but listening to and interpreting Scripture is a part of who we are as community of Christians. "Christian discipleship is anything but individualistic. Becoming a Christian involves being incorporated into particular communities of disciples set on the journey of becoming friends of God and bearing witness to the good news of God's inbreaking kingdom. Baptism, specifically baptism into Christ, through the triune name is the ritual activity that signifies our transition from friendship with the 'world' into friendship with God. Baptism signifies are in Corporation into the eschatological reign of God, and we learn to participate in God's reign through participation in Christian communities." <sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict. Why Scripture Matters*. 29.

<sup>96</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. 70-71.

Dr. Hess states that within our Christian world of conflict and disagreement, it is a radical covenant of community that we need to participate in to be formed as a Christian. We especially need this covenant to remain together.

“The purpose of being claimed is to serve one another on behalf of One and all. In order to learn limitations and to receive humility’s gifts, one must receive such care from another. One must be open to being served as much as one’s desires to serve. When disagreement arises – and it assuredly will, with great threat and wounding—the claim remains.”<sup>97</sup>

Not only is participating in Christian community an important part of who we are, it is essential in listening to, reading, and interpreting Scripture. It is indeed our relationship as a community of faith that is important in our ability to interpret.

“Our life together should reflect the dynamics and interrelations of the Trinity. But it also reflects the shape of things to come. The community’s meal not only reflects the darkness of Christ’s death but anticipates the delight of the messiah’s table. Here amid sadness and laughter, reflection and conversation, deference and kindness, word and action, eating and sharing, we express the sacrificial love of Christ in our active concern for one another and experience the fellowship of the saints that will one day fill our lives.”<sup>98</sup>

Not only is our relationship together important, we also need to approach the Scriptures as Holy. “We read in order to get in on the revelation of God, who is so emphatically personal; we read the Bible the way it comes to us, not in the way we come to it; we submit ourselves to the various and complementary operations of God the father,

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<sup>97</sup> Hess, *Artisanal Theology : Intentional Formation in Radically Covenantal Companionship*. 104.

<sup>98</sup> Banks and Banks, *The Church Comes Home*. 42.

God the son, and God the Holy Spirit; we receive these words so that we can be informed now and for eternity to the glory of God.”<sup>99</sup>

Scripture and Christian community have a unique relationship. “On the one hand Scripture shapes the community in distinctive ways. Scripture forms the community’s character. It conforms the community of faith to the image of Christ. On the other hand, the character of the community shapes its reading of Scripture. Scripture is not simply a particular content, a ‘right’ meaning that one applies to life. Rather, the community, as it reads Scripture and seeks to embody it in its way of life, engages in the process of discerning how Christ is taking shape within the community here and now. If community is to read Scripture rightly, it needs to be trained in such virtues as hospitality (especially to strangers) and practical wisdom.”<sup>100</sup>

Indeed a community’s right relationship with each other and with Scripture is perhaps the best way through the conflicts that are afflicting the church today.

“Because Scripture is the church’s book, the renewed sense of church unity may contribute to a renewed consensus about Scripture’s basic message and the authority of that message. We therefore need to explore disciplines of prayer, discernment, and service that can transcend our differences. We need to listen again to the historic faith, confident that it offers us insight into the very issues that divide us. If we experience a sense of deeper community together, we may read Scripture with greater unanimity.

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<sup>99</sup> Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. *Eat This Book*. 30-31.

<sup>100</sup> Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*. *Why Scripture Matters*. 154.



Conversely, a renewed sense of Scripture's capacity to mediate an encounter with Christ may contribute to a renewal of church unity."<sup>101</sup>

Revelation, the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and community are central to this project. Stephen B. Fowl and L. Gregory used the illustration of the struggle the "Confessing Church" of Dietrich Bonhoeffer had with the majority Church of Germany (*Reichskirche*) in his days. In both communities Scripture was read, Bible discussion groups were organized, children were baptized, and liturgical festivals were celebrated. However, there was a distinct difference between the two communities.

"The text is not just historical sources, but agents of Revelation, not just specimens of writing, but sacred canon. Bonhoeffer insists that readings informed by historical issues are inevitable, because none of us can revert to the pre-critical age. But the importance of that work is relativized: we need interpretation guided by the Holy Spirit. In Bonhoeffer's terms, 'for history Scripture is only a source, for pneumatology it is testimony.'"<sup>102</sup>

Bonhoeffer is operating from the theological position of Barth. Revelation ultimately is a divine decision, is God's decision through the Holy Spirit, and just as the church is connected to the body of Christ, which is both holy and divine, so too is the word of God. Bonhoeffer and his Confessing Church were more enlightened by the Spirit. The "German Christians" insisted that the Fuehrer was sent by God and was head of the Church; the Confessing Church opposed this. The "German Christians'" theology was mixed by ancient Germanic myths and anti-Semitism. Bonhoeffer had been able to distinguish between the word and the Word. Bonhoeffer's theological challenge to Hitler

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>102</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. 138.

soon became more explicit. In 1933, as Hitler was coming to power, Bonhoeffer delivered a series of lectures on Christology. He insisted that Jesus Christ, the risen Christ, is present in the word, in the sacrament, and in the community.<sup>103</sup>

Bonhoeffer was put in charge of a seminary of the confessing Church in Germany and asked to prepare clergy to serve churches that would be able to resist the claims of Hitler. “In Bonhoeffer’s view, that required a revitalization of discipleship learned and lived in Christian community. As he wrote to his brother in 1935-36... The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, having nothing in common with the old the life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ.”<sup>104</sup>

Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by the theology of Karl Barth. One hears the Word of God by studying and hearing Scripture; and the community is built up by it. This holds true for both passages that were studied, in Nehemiah and in Acts.

Though we speak of the *Sacred* Scriptures, these are, however, thoroughly human compositions. They are therefore fallible and subject to biblical criticism. In Barth’s view one must read Scripture in a dialectical manner in debate and comparisons. Whether God is revealing his Word depends entirely on the working of the Spirit in the exercise.

The true Word of God was revealed through Jesus Christ. As John expressed it: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God revealed himself indisputably in

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<sup>103</sup>Ibid. 142.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 143.

the teachings and person of Jesus. And the Gospel includes his being rejected and crucified and his being raised at the Right Hand (Phil 2, 9 and Mk 14:62).<sup>105</sup>

The question is when and where did the people “hear” the Word of God in Germany during World War II? Was it (a) in the main church, sometimes called the *Reichskirche*? The German Christians were Nazi supported and members were asked to sign a statement of loyalty. Or was it (b) in the community of the *Confessing Church*, organized under the leadership of Bonhoeffer and Barth?

We know in hindsight the answer, while at the time this wasn’t clear at all. Both were claiming to study Scripture, applying biblical criticism, and trying to discern the will of God.

Here the third criterion comes into play. It could best be illustrated by a story told by Rev. Dr. Karel Hanhart. He was a youth, attending catechism during wartime. “But, pastor, why do you oppose Hitler? Hasn’t he lifted the social conditions of the poor? Has he not provided work for the unemployed? And above all, is he not a religious man of faith? Has he not been called by God or, as he put it, by Providence? He repeatedly speaks of the Providence of God and of his mission to the German nation. Then the pastor replied: “But have you heard him *once* mentioning the name of Jesus?”<sup>106</sup>

Much can be said and has been written about the Confessing Church. In the Barmen Declaration, for instance, drawn up by the Confessing Church, the persecution of the Jews was not outright condemned. Undoubtedly, this was prudent in view of the

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<sup>105</sup> Karl Barth, *The Christian Life : Church Dogmatics Iv, 4 : Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1981).

<sup>106</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Otto Dudzus, *Bonhoeffer Brevier*, Kaiser Verlag Muenchen 391 “Re. the Name of Jesus,” (Meditation for October 5, 1963).

totalitarian Nazi regime. But Bonhoeffer's Confessing Church openly resisted Nazi propaganda in the Name of Jesus as Head of the Church.

The situation of the communities in Israel of old as willed (a) by Nehemiah and (b) by the apostles as witnessed in Acts, and (c) in Germany during WW II, differed a good deal.

The need was felt in all three cases to discern the Will of God through studying the Scriptures. This has been pointed out above with regard to (a) and (b). But it holds true for the church in Germany (c) as well. Most Germans, Catholic and Protestant, were baptized Christians. It is known that the main churches accepted more or less the Nazi regime appealing to Romans 13:1, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except by God, and those authorities that exist are instituted by God."

In all three cases religious people were divided in different camps. In the case of Nehemiah and Ezra we find (a) the established government that was situated in the city of Samaria, because the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, and (b) people loyal to the Temple requesting Nehemiah to come to the rescue. The issue was building the walls of the city, restoring Jerusalem to its former position as the center of worship. Sanballat, the Samaritan, opposed it severely so that the builders became discouraged.

Nehemiah charged the people that they had mixed their religion with paganism. This charge was particularly painful because it had an effect on many a family of a mixed marriage, with the wife adhering to a "pagan" religion.

Reading the Torah in public was an act of loyalty to Israel's tradition and of defiance against the ruling powers. It was ultimately an act of faith in God, God's word,

and of their revelation as discerned by the people and their celebration of the Festival of Booths.

In Acts the community was formed through loyalty to Jesus and his teachings, especially after he had been crucified. They based their belief that he was the Messiah on the study of Scripture and the experience of the resurrection. They were, however, vehemently opposed by the rulers, in particular by the high priest. As in the situation in Germany the same need of studying the Scripture and discerning the Spirit of God was felt in each of these situations.

The above theological conclusions concerning Revelation and the Word in three very different times is relevant for the church and its mission today.

Scripture and Christian community have a unique relationship. Christian community is shaped by Scripture to be a healthy model of the life of Christ. The Word of God comes to light through the Scripture in such a community. The situation of Nehemiah, the community of Acts, and the churches, the *Reichskirche*, in Germany show how difficult it can be to find a faithful community, open to listening to the word of God. The people studying the Torah around the Water Gate, the early Christian communities in Acts, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Confessing Church are examples to model.

It will be interesting to begin this study and explore how congregational Bible Study relates to missional call.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Hypothesis**

The purpose of this project is to explore the relation of congregational Bible study to the discernment of the congregation's missional call. The hypothesis is that a communal practice of placing Scripture at its center will help the church gain a deeper connection with God and with their community, and will help the congregation be clearer about their mission.

The hypothesis came out of a three-year process of church transformation. The pastor of the Slifers Presbyterian Church and its session worked to discover more about the surrounding community and themselves. It was their goal to discern a direction for the church. In addition they hoped to design a strategy that fit the structure and gifts of the church, connected the church with the community, and addressed some of the issues of Slifers Presbyterian.

The pastor invited the Center for Parish Development, based in Chicago, Illinois, to make a presentation to the church concerning their approach to Church Transformation. They approached the work from the standpoint that God's mission needs a church. If followed the main part of the congregation's work would be to listen to God. The hypothesis for this study was formed as Slifers began this new journey.

The new direction enjoined the whole Church community to spend time reading Scripture together to discover God's call.

### **Intervention**

Slifers Presbyterian has seen significant changes in the community and in the congregation in the last 10 to 15 years. The change in the size of the church was especially difficult. It became difficult to maintain the programming, and the structure. Much of the energy of the church was used to maintain the work of the six committees.

The Center for Parish Development likes to say God's mission needs a church. The process they have designed has an emphasis on listening to God in the past and present, specifically through a communal reading and interpretation of Scripture.

Slifers began the "Journey of the People of God" guided by the Center for Parish Development. There are three phases in the journey. They are "Discovering, Discerning, and Embodying." The Discovering phase is about discovering who we are, our present situation, and our community. The Discerning phase is to become in tune with the Spirit and discern the purpose of Slifers' missional work. At the end of this phase a Vision panel is assembled consisting of six people who have attended all the Scripture studies and other events. The Vision panel's task was to prayerfully write out a new vision for the church. Embodying is the last phase when the church will put the vision into practice. In essence the goal of Slifers' work is the transformation of the congregation to move into a more missional posture.

The process was designed around three communal Scripture studies to encourage participation. Two of the Scripture studies are evaluated and studied in this project. A Coordinating team of six people was established to guide the church. They planned a conference on the past, a conference on the present, the three communal Scripture studies, and an all-church retreat. The vision panel discerned a new Vision for the Church, and the Session (church board) of the church will guide the next steps of living out the vision.

The communal Scripture studies were the main part of this process. The first Scripture study is called “Behold: There is a New Creation.” This Bible study concerns the big picture of God’s good dream for the people of God. It looks at the early church and how it is shaped by the new creation of Jesus Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of a new community. While this Bible study does not cover the entire Old and New Testaments, it does draw out central themes and explore how they illuminate and are illuminated by the Apostle Paul’s image of “new creation” in Second Corinthians 5. It follows this theme from Genesis 1-2, Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah 66:22, Isaiah 32:15-18, to 2 Peter 3:13.

The “Behold” Scripture study includes six sessions. Session 1 discusses “Becoming a People of the Dream.” Session 2 is about “God’s Dream: The Good Creation,” and Session 3 concerns “The Rejection of the Dream: Broken Relationships” by the people. Session 4 is about “Redemption of the Dream: Healed Relationship.” Session 5 is entitled “The Manifestation of the Dream.” The last session concerns “The Promise and Power of the Dream,” with the assurance that God continues to have a new dream for all people. (See Appendix F.)



The second Scripture study, covered in-depth in this project, was entitled “A People of Salt and Light: Jesus’ Model for Community.” This study is based on the Sermon on the Mount. The congregation was challenged to think about the nature of community; to explore Jesus’ vision or model of Christian community; to experience Christian community through prayer, study, and discussion; and finally to reflect on the ministry at Slifers. How might their community fully express the kind of community they discern that Jesus is calling them to be? (See Appendix G.)

The last Scripture study series, also covered in-depth in this project, is entitled “Co-missioned.” Early Christian communities sought to discern and express the unique mission of Jesus for their time and place. The approach of this study is to acquaint the people anew with the “great commissions” of Jesus. Quite often when people think of the mission of the church, they quote Matthew 28:18-20: “Go therefore and make disciples....” But along with Matthew’s model of “making disciples” there are at least three other missional perspectives: from the gospel of Mark, Luke, and John, along with testimony from the apostle Paul. This study explores all five perspectives on what the mission of Jesus means for the church community of faith situated in each unique time and place. They are (see Appendix H):

- Mark—A Community Proclaiming the Gospel (Mk 1:15, Mk 10:32-45, Mk 16:14-20)
- Luke—The Church as Sign of the Reign of God (Lk 4:14-30, Lk 24:44-49)
- John—A Sent Community (Jn 20:19-23)

- Matthew—A Community of Discipleship (Mt 10:17, 16:24-25 a readiness to suffer, Mt 19:23-26; 6:19-21 to be poor, Mt.18:1-5 to be humble, Mt. 25:31-40 to love, Mt.23:1-12 to reject worldly honor, Mt.20:20-28 to serve
- Paul—A Community of Reconciliation (Phil 2:1-18)

There are six churches in the surrounding area going through the same process and all are supported by the Center for Parish Development. The Coordinating teams from the churches have met three times a year and have supported one another in their journey of congregational transformation.

The following intervention was put in place to understand or test the hypothesis: Will a communal practice of placing Scripture at its center help the church gain a deeper connection with God and community? It is hoped that this will help the church to be clear about their mission; and to be focused in living it out.

### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative study. Qualitative research involves a process of building a complex and holistic picture of the phenomenon of interest. It is conducted in a natural setting. The goal of the qualitative study is to develop an understanding of a social or human problem.<sup>1</sup>

John W. Creswell's book entitled *Research Design, Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* explains the logic behind a qualitative approach. There are

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<sup>1</sup>Jackie Bastion, Qualitative & Quantitative Research (lecture, United Theological Seminary, August 16, 2010).

several steps. The researcher: gathers information; then asks open-ended questions; then analyses data to form themes or categories; then looks for broad patterns, generalizations, or theories from themes or categories; and finally poses generalizations or theories from past experiences and literature.<sup>2</sup>

Creswell recommends that each researcher's proposal use the following format. The following questions need to be addressed. What do you propose to do, what is the setting, and who are the people that you will study? What method do you plan to use to provide data? How will you validate your findings? What ethical issues will your study present? Also, discuss any preliminary pilot findings if available. The questions are addressed below.

The project will take place with the members (165 members) of Slifers Presbyterian Church who are going through a process of discerning God's missional call. Their journey or work together includes three Bible Studies.

The second two of these Bible study series will take place during the spring of 2011. They are written by the Center for Parish Development and are a part of the entire process of congregational transformation that the Center has developed. The first Bible study series is called "The People of Salt and Light: Jesus' Model for Community." It is 4 weeks long and will take place on Sunday and Tuesday evenings in people's homes. The second Bible study series is called "Co-missioned," is five weeks long, and will take place during the regular Sunday School hour and on Tuesday evenings in a person's home. Both Sunday school classes who normally meet before worship will participate in place of their normal class.

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<sup>2</sup>John W. Creswell, *Research Design : Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2009). 63.

The researcher is the Pastor of Slifers Presbyterian Church. He is a member of the leadership team of the Bible studies and will lead one session of the studies. He is the author of the surveys that will be administered and collected by the Coordinating Team. He participated in the nomination of the Coordinating team. He is involved in the training of the Coordinating team, but is not the chair of that team. The team will be planning and leading the three-year Church Transformation process in conjunction with the Center for Parish Development. The Coordinating Team will facilitate the Scripture studies. They will receive training for the Scripture studies from the Center for Parish Development when they meet with the other six churches. In addition there will be a one-hour training session for the leaders at Slifers. The entire congregation will be invited to both series of Scripture studies. There will be an article in the newsletter and a letter sent to all members of the community. Each study series will take place in different months. The congregation will be invited separately to each study. The Slifers church community, and in particular the members who attend church regularly (sixty) will most likely participate as they have a greater interest in the church. The surveys will not ask for the participant's name or any other identifying information to protect the anonymity of the participant.

The format will include a reading of Scripture, and then the reading of a short discussion starter on the Scripture. The participants will be broken into small groups to discuss the questions posed to them in the study. The small groups will be called back for an open discussion. The first study series is four weeks long and is called "A People of Salt and Light, Jesus Model for Community." The second study series, called "Co-Missioned," is six weeks long. There is one session each week.

This study is a part of a larger process. The Church will be using an action research approach to this project. When this study is completed the church will use the information gleaned and continue their work of living out their vision. This model includes and relies on leaders of the church who are seeking to improve the congregation's missional work and focus, and on a broad participation of the members of the church community. The approach promotes broad participation and increases the usefulness of the study and work. Slifers' leadership and congregation embarked on a work; they are expecting a result of actionable change. This project's purpose is to research and document a portion of that work. The action research model is perfect for the church's ongoing mission.<sup>3</sup>

### **Instrument**

The data for this study will be collected through a self-administered questionnaire. The Coordinating team will administer the pre and post-tests which will contain the questions designed to gather information concerning the participants' awareness of Scripture, mission, and Slifers. They will also administer a flash test after each session. In addition, there will also be a small random sampling of participants who will be given an additional survey to augment the information gleaned from the questionnaire. This will allow for some expanded answers. The questionnaire will be guided by a resource called *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*,<sup>4</sup> and through discussion with the Professional Associates for this project. The reliability of the data and analysis will be

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<sup>3</sup> Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research : Social Research for Social Change*.

<sup>4</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*.

enhanced because the sources of information will be thus triangulated. There will be a before and after questionnaire, and one requested right after each session of all participants of each Study. The “A People of Salt and Light” Bible Study will take place during the 6 weeks of Lent, and the “Co-Missioned” study will take place between Easter and Pentecost.

### **Measurement**

An important aspect of qualitative research is that the researcher immerse himself or herself in what is being researched to get the best possible picture of what happened. The researcher of this project will have written the survey questions, attended training sessions led by the Center for Parish Development, helped to train the coordinating team, attended most of the Scripture study sessions, gathered older surveys, and when both Scripture studies series are complete, the answers will be collated.

Then, with all this data and information, the researcher will take time to comprehend all of this to seek out patterns and themes. The goal then is to shed some light on the relationship of a series of communal Scripture studies and people’s understanding of mission and Slifers Presbyterian Church.

The researcher will conduct a value analysis of the written answers in the surveys. Each answer will be coded and given a value and categorized as a learning, participation, mission, or spiritually oriented answer. For example the first question of the “A People of Salt and Light” Bible study (Appendix A1) asks, “What are your expectations for this Bible study?” An answer valued as a learning answer was “look at Bible Scriptures in a different perspective.” An answer valued as participation was “connect with others in

their belief in Jesus Christ.” Another question in the same opening survey is “What kinds of practices or activities is Slifers being called to grow strong in?” An answer valued as a participation answer was “More children & youth involved.” An answer labeled mission was “More outreach to poor.” An answer valued as spirit was “Following God’s direction.” (See Appendix A2.) This detailed coding process will allow the researcher to organize the material so it is more manageable. It will also help the researcher to check for themes and patterns. The content of the data will also be reviewed for insights by the respondents into the relationship of communal Scripture study and missional call.

The data will be analyzed with the context associates from Slifers Presbyterian Church and with the Professional Associate. There are some global questions we will be considering. Will the congregation be open to listening to and participating in these communal Scripture studies? Will a communal practice of Scripture study have an effect on the church’s discernment of their missional call? Will a communal practice of Scripture study have an effect on Slifers’ Community, its internal relationship and participation? Will a communal practice of Scripture study have an effect on Slifers’ connection with God, their understanding of God, listening to God? What insights has the congregation received from these studies?

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FIELD EXPERIENCE**

#### **Collection of Data**

Surveys were given to the participants of the last two in a series of three communal Scripture studies series which took place from June 2010 to June 2011 at Slifers Presbyterian Church. The Communal Scripture studies were taught by members of the Coordinating team; one was led by the researcher. The six team members were appointed by the Session to coordinate the church transformation process. The surveys were written by this author with the help of Dr. Larry Grunden, who taught contextual analysis at United Seminary, and Ray Schulte from the Center for Parish Development. Also helpful was the use of a resource entitled *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, by Nancy Tatom Ammerman. There was a survey given at the beginning of each of the Scripture studies, one at the end of each session, and one at the end of each Scripture study. The surveys were anonymous and attendance was not taken. This was done to ensure that a maximum number of participants truthfully completed a survey. The Coordinating team reported that about 90 percent of those present completed a survey. The survey for the first lesson of the second study series “Co-missioned” was not given by the leader and so is not a part of the data presented.

Each session of the first study series, “A People of Salt and Light” was conducted on Saturday morning and Tuesday night at a person’s home.



On average there were more people at the study which took place on Saturday than those conducted on Tuesday evening. The discussions were rich and intimate in the home setting. The second study series, “Co- Missioned” was conducted on Sunday morning before church during the education hour, and on Tuesday night at a person’s home. The surveys were collated. Each answer was preserved as they were given in the collation. They are found in the Appendices A and B.

A final survey was filled out by four different respondents in order to add validity to the conclusions of the author. Two respondents were contextual associates and two were at random. All those who were participants were invited via email to fill out this survey. There were only two respondents. The researcher felt this was sufficient to provide the additional data needed. The questions and complete responses are found in Appendix C.

### **Data Analysis**

An analysis will be completed of all the surveys given to the participants of the two Study Series by assigning a value to each written answer. Each answer was categorized as a learning, participation, mission, or spirit oriented answer. The values are in red next to each answer on the survey found in Appendix A and Appendix B. There were two reasons for doing this. One, this detailed coding process will allow the researcher to organize the material so it is more manageable. Two, this will help the researcher to check for themes and patterns and look for changes. This analysis will be

followed by a discussion of the outcomes. The six global questions the researcher was interested in will be dealt with. This review will include information gleaned from the analysis of the coded surveys and the actual responses given by the four people who were asked to respond directly to the global questions.

### “A People of Salt and Light” Jesus Model for Community

#### **Opening Survey (Appendix A1)**

It can be discerned from the survey responses that the people participating in this Scripture study saw themselves as very connected to Slifers. Thirteen of fourteen people answered positively to the question “Do you see yourself as a part of the church?” Ten said “Quite a bit.” Three said “A very great deal.” Two questions asked the respondents if they had participated in Bible study before. Half of those who responded said they had participated “Little” or “Somewhat” in Bible studies. To the question “How helpful do you believe Bible study is?” twelve of fourteen people said they believed it would help. Eight said “Quite a bit” and four “A very great deal.” In addition, the people felt new perspectives are needed concerning Slifers mission. Six said “Somewhat,” and five said “Quite a bit.” A picture is developing of the participants. Many are new to Bible study yet they have high expectations that this study will be relevant and helpful. They have purpose in that they feel some new perspectives are needed.

The next questions have to do with whether or not Scripture study has helped in the past. “Has Bible study helped you make a change?” Nine out of thirteen people said “Little” or “Somewhat.” And to the question “Has Bible study helped the church make a change?” seven out of eleven said “Little” or “Somewhat.” It can be stated that though expectation is high for this study, outcomes have not always been that way in the past.

The participants answered the question “What are your expectations for this Bible study? Seven participants indicated they want to learn (L) something, four indicated they want to share or participate (P) with others, three were concerned with mission (M), and one hoped for something spiritual (S).

Participants were asked to name a missional focus or vision Slifers worked toward in the past. There were no learning (L) oriented responses, six responses pointed to participation (P). Responses included “small groups,” “Fundraisers–working together,” and “Ice cream socials.” Seven were mission (M) oriented responses, including “Heifer project,” and “Community outreach.” According to the respondents’ efforts toward building up Slifers, community and its mission work are equally important.

Two questions asked what issues or needs Slifers needed to address and or grow stronger in. Out of 20 responses, ten indicated people’s concern about participation (P). Responses included “more participation from all members,” “youth,” “membership–quality and quantity,” “plays,” and “membership.” Seven indicated a concern for Mission (M) as an area needing to be addressed. For example, “how to relate to community we live in,” address the “Poor in the community,” and “Reach out.” Learning (L) and spirit (S) were areas that participants felt Slifers did not need to address or grow stronger in. Participation and mission issues are high on the radar of participants.

A second piece of the picture is emerging from these responses. Participation within the church is valued: “ice cream socials,” “visitations in homes,” “Membership–quality and quantity,” and “Small groups.” Also, outreach into the community is valued: “poor in community,” “Reach out,” “heifer project,” and “Community outreach.”

### **Session 1-4 Survey Compilation (Appendix A2)**

Appendix A2 is a compilation of the responses given to three questions given at the end of each session of the “A People of Salt and Light” series.

To the question “Did you feel free to participate?” out of thirty-five responses fourteen indicated “Quite a bit,” and twenty said “A very great deal.” To the question “Were you engaged in discussion today?” out of thirty-five responses 16 indicated “Quite a bit,” and 13 said “A very great deal.” There is no doubt that people felt engaged and free to talk through this series.

The responses to the last question, “What one thing did you learn, or that was interesting today?” was very interesting. The topic of the Bible study was Jesus model for community. Sessions included a study of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Most responses fit in the spiritual (S) category instead of responses oriented to participation (P) and mission (M). Of twenty-six responses, thirteen were (S) responses. Here are some of those answers: “First time I openly disagreed with someone during bible study,” “How we need to strive to be like each beatitude,” “openness and love of our group,” “How to deal with anger,” “Pray pray pray,” and “Love is important to use at all times in community.” There were nine responses about learning (L), including “new perspectives on the Beatitudes,” and “Beatitudes interesting points.” There is a shift in the orientation of responses from the opening survey. More responses are oriented to mission/spirit than learning/participation.

One cannot draw hard and fast conclusions from this data. Many factors could contribute to this change. However, it can be said that people’s focus shifted to Mission and Spiritual concerns.

### **Closing Survey (Appendix A3)**

Participants were asked to write down three words that describe how the Bible study series had been for them. The people indicated that they had learned something, enjoyed it, and were challenged by the studies. They chose words like *thought-provoking*, *salty*, *discerning*, *enjoyable*, *friendly*, *community*, and *challenging*.

Of the eight people who completed a closing survey, one person had gone to two of the four “A People of Salt and Light” sessions, four people had gone to three of the sessions and three people had gone to all four sessions.

On page two there was a two-part question about the challenge Jesus gave to show a radical love toward our neighbor. The first part of the question asked the participants how Slifers does this currently. The second part of the question asked to describe ways that are opportunities for Slifers to do that. To the first half seven of thirteen responses were mission (M) responses. For example “Community action commission program. (A local nonprofit also known as C.A.M.P),” “C. A. M. P.,” “Reaching out to others,” and “Love.” There were three spirit (S) responses. For example, “worship,” and “simple honest speech.” There were three participation (P) responses, including “social gatherings” and “dinners.”

In the opening survey a similar question was asked about “missional focuses or visions Slifers worked towards in the past.” Almost half were participation (P) responses.

The second part of the question about the Jesus Model for Community that the study describes as a radical love of our neighbor asked about the opportunities the participants feel Slifers has. Eight out of eleven responses noted missional (M) opportunities. For example, “unemployed,” “loving others outside the boundaries of

church,” “the Bible study applicable to multiple generations turns this into a house church.” There were two spiritual (S) answers and one participation (P) answer.

This question also has a corollary in the opening survey. Two questions asked what Slifers needed to address or grow stronger in. By far the largest numbers of responses (ten out of twenty) were concerning participation (P). For example, “more participation from members,” “membership,” and “more children and youth involved.” Secondly Mission (M) was mentioned as an area needing to be addressed. Learning (L) and spirit (S) were areas that participants felt Slifers did not need to address or grow stronger in.

The responses to the surveys point to a shift of the people’s focus. Rather than thinking about participation (P) or learning (L), the focus is to thinking more about mission (M) and spirit (S).

The closing survey had one poorly worded question. It read “Jesus describes a model community which is different from the world around. How is Slifers standing apart because of their faithfulness to this model?” The question was intended to find out how people thought Slifers’ community was standing apart from the rest of the world in following Jesus model for community. By the way people responded to this question one can tell that there were different interpretations as to what was being asked. “I don’t think Slifers is in this for the attention. It’s for God’s mission.” “We are a welcoming, friendly church.” It was difficult to glean information because of the wording of the question.

The responses to the last question were interesting. It asked “What insights did this Bible study give you concerning the issues facing small churches?” Responses included “Need for church Bible study,” “we are okay small, we really are okay!”

“Community and faith can be of any size.” “Larger does not always equate to better.”

“Small churches can and do follow (or attempt to follow) the radical love we learned about. If we are about love, we will be blessed, no matter our size.” The insights gained seem pretty clear in the minds of the participants. The number of people participating in church is not the issue; rather it is the quality of the participation.

### “Co-Missioned”

The content of this series of Scripture study seemed more challenging for the participants. Whereas the first study series was on the familiar ground of the Sermon on the Mount, this series presented five different approaches to mission. Typically people think of mission in terms of Matthew’s “Go therefore and make disciples.” But along with those perspectives are mission perspectives from the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, and from the apostle Paul. In short the study series points out that Mark’s community, which was persecuted and ostracized, saw their mission as *proclaiming the good news*. (Mk 16:15). Luke writes to a second generation church who is trying to reach a new Gentile audience struggling to understand who they really are. Luke attempted to help the mainly Gentile faith communities and challenge them not to be like the whole world around them, a world which has now favored the rich, the powerful. They are to be, or the church is to be, a “*sign of God’s reign*.” Repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed in Jesus’ name to all nations (Lk 24:47). The church is to be good news to the poor, to help the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead raised. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “*As the father has sent me, so I send you*.” (Jn 20:21) Essentially John’s model for mission is to go out into the world to be like Jesus. Paul’s ministry can be characterized as a ministry of *reconciliation* (2 Cor 5:18).

### **Opening Survey (Appendix B1)**

Many people continue to identify themselves as new to the series of studies; six of eleven so indicated. People also continue to have high expectations for this study series. For example, they said they expected “Clarity for Slifers vision,” “lively discussion,” and “responses to our moments into the future.”

Participants had very positive experiences in the first communal Scripture study. Therefore, high expectations on the part of participants is understandable. Here are some of the responses to the question: “Excellent for all of us to study the same Bible studies,” “Help us focus on goals, Spirit lead,” “Participation has been better than I expected. It’s great to learn/study with a different group.” In response to the question “Have these whole church studies had a Spiritual impact on the Church?” Six of eleven said “Quite a bit,” one said “A very great deal.” They felt the same when asked “Have these whole church studies had a spiritual impact on you?” Six of ten said “Quite a bit.”

### **Session 2–Mark (Appendix B2)**

For the first time people were less engaged in discussion. Eight of fourteen respondents said “a little” when asked if they were engaged.

Six of fourteen respondents didn’t answer the first question asking what Slifers would need to do to adopt Mark’s model of mission. Though some did, as these responses indicate: “More proclamation to neighborhood, our own work place, etc.,” “Greater community spirit.” Participants had a harder time making a connection.

It was an interesting lesson for most people. Almost everyone pointed to something specific they learned. For example: “History of disciples,” “How things are so different but some things so similar when look back into history,” “background



info/history was very good.” It seemed as though participants learned a lot but struggled to connect with Mark’s situation.

### **Session 3—John (Appendix B3)**

John’s model of a people sent by Jesus connected with people. In particular, because people have had personal experience with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and of being sent themselves. Almost all the responses to the survey were in the spirit (S) category. “Being sent” responses could have been about learning (L) about it, or responses could have been about where to be sent in mission (M) or about something to participate in or invite others to participate in (P), but instead all the answers were focused on the Spirit(S). For example: “We admit we are not as perfect as we want to think!” “Very much, excitement for life,” “Feel it in joy of worship, care of each other, responsibility.” There is again some evidence that the participants shifted their focus more to the spiritual aspects. People continue to be open, “We can be different but still have the same mission,” and listening, “Without the spirit we are not a church.”

### **Session 4—Luke (Appendix B4)**

This session drew the greatest number of participants; it is not clear why. It could be that the leader was more diligent in getting the surveys filled out. People felt a little more engaged in this session. When asked if they were engaged, four said “A very great deal,” four said “Quite a bit,” six said “Somewhat,” and six said “Little.” Only ten of twenty participants answered the first question. “If Slifers would adopt Luke’s model of mission what would be different?” Perhaps people were stretched a little in their thinking of the church as a sign of the reign of God and how Slifers might need to change. Those

people who responded identified that Slifers would need to do more reaching out to the community. Here are some responses: “We would reach out more to our neighbors,” “We already do a lot,” and “Reach out more.”

When asked “Who in today’s society are excluded and what are we called to do?” sixteen out of twenty respondents gave a detailed answer to this question. “Different religions, different color, different beliefs, poor—include them since God allowed his son to die for them and for me,” “Sick=visit and pray for both, elderly, poor=clothe and feed them,” “People we are uncomfortable with.” The study participants are very much in touch with their community and their situations, and connected with the need to work toward the healing of others. It seems they also believe Slifers has adopted Luke’s model of mission of what would need to change. Here are some of the responses: “We already do a good job of mission,” “Not sure much would change,” “We already do a lot!” “We would reach out more to our neighbors.”

### **Session 5—Closing Survey (Appendix B5)**

This session drew the least number of survey respondents. There were at least thirteen people who participated in this session on Paul’s model of mission, a community of reconciliation. However, only five people gave written responses to the questions and seven completed the questions which required them to check a box. There was a survey “fatigue.” It will be somewhat difficult to draw conclusions from these surveys for this reason.

The first three questions of the closing survey are concerned with Paul’s model of mission that is centered on a community of reconciliation. The three questions are “What would Slifers need to do to adopt this model?” “What one thing did you learn?” and

“What would this model look like in the church?” The respondents to these questions show the respondents perceive Slifers as being an open, accepting, forgiving congregation. For example, they said things like “forgiving more,” “accept others’ opinions and find compromises,” “Open discussion,” “Agreeing to disagree and tolerance and love,” “Continued acceptance of each other.” The spirit and tenor of these responses are similar to those given in Session 3. The people believe that the Slifers Community is an open and tolerant community.

The next portion of the closing survey concerned the whole study series. The question asked respondents to “Write down three words that describe what you learned about mission in this study series.” Of thirteen responses three were mission (M) and seven were spirit (S) oriented. Words they chose were “forgiveness,” “Holy Spirit,” “be humble,” “Be open,” “Tolerance,” and “be of one mind.”

The same question was asked at the closing of the first study series. Of the 22 responses nine were learning (L) and two were participation (P) oriented responses. Words they chose were “focused,” “thought-provoking,” “Bible comparisons,” “thought-provoking,” and “learning.” The researcher has come to believe that in these studies people have spoken more about an openness, acceptance, spirit-filled presence within the community.

## Outcomes

### Global Questions

The first global question the researcher wondered about was, “Will the congregation be open to listening to and participate in these communal Scripture studies?” There were anywhere from 10 to 25 participants, or from 17 percent to 42

percent of the worshipping community (see Appendix A and B). There were noticeably more participants in these studies than those who come to the regular Christian education hour before worship. The surveys indicate that most were interested in the studies. For example, in the survey taken during the “A People of Salt and Light” study, 28 of 34 checked that they were quite a bit engaged, or were engaged a very great deal. The surveys show there was more participation than usual and that it was greater than some folks expected, and people were interested (Appendix A-2).

Throughout the surveys the interest, openness, and desire to share and learn are apparent. There is again some evidence that the participants shifted their focus more to the spiritual aspects. People continue to be open. “We can be different but still have the same mission,” Joyful,” “Very much, excitement for life,” and “listening.” “Without the spirit we are not a church.” One person said this is the first time he or she openly disagreed with someone. Even up to the last session, people noted “accept others’ opinions and find compromises,” “Open discussion,” “Agreeing to disagree and tolerance and love,” and “Continued acceptance of each other.” A couple of people dropped out. It is possible, though not known for sure, that they believed their beliefs were different and they chose to drop out.

The second question that the researcher wondered about was, “Will a communal practice of Scripture study have an effect on the church’s discernment of their missional call?” This is, of course, difficult to answer as we don’t know quantitatively exactly what people thought before and after the studies. However, the researcher noticed a shift in emphasis and orientation in a couple of instances. As noted in the survey analysis there was a shift from responses oriented toward learning and participation to more mission

and spiritual. (Refer to Session 1-4 Survey Compilation (Appendix A2), Closing Survey (Appendix A3), Session 3—John (Appendix B3).) In the beginning of this project and as indicated by respondents' answers there was more of a concern about participation in church than about numbers. Behind that concern is a concern about how are we going to make it as a church. Many small churches struggle with that question.

In the closing survey of the “A People of Salt and Light” study (Appendix A3), the participants were asked: “There are many issues facing small churches. What new insights did this Bible Study give you concerning those issues?”

- L How to look at the situation; more in-depth focus on the multitude rather than the individual.
- L Need for church bible study
- M To see vision for Slifers
- S We are OK small, we really are OK!
- P Importance of community
- S Size does not matter
- S A community in faith can be any size
- S Numbers is NOT important! People are!
- S Larger does not always equate to better. Small churches can and do follow (or attempt to follow) the radical love we learned about. If we are about love, we will be blessed, no matter our size

An important change was taking place. As the study went on the concerns about being a small church were less prevalent.

Participants also reported very positive experiences in the first communal Scripture study. Here are some of the responses to the question “Do you think these whole church studies have had a Spiritual impact on the church?” Six of eleven said “Quite a bit,” one said “A very great deal” They felt the same when asked “Have these whole church studies had a spiritual impact on you?” Six out of ten said “Quite a bit.”

In the opening study of the last study series people were asked that very question: “Has your understanding of the issues and opportunities for Slifers changed or become clearer since we began Scouting for the Spirit?”

1	Little	8	Somewhat	1	Quite a Bit	A Very
_____		_____		_____		_____ Great Deal

### **Can you give some examples?**

I marked somewhat because I think what we’re talking about is far bigger than just Slifers; it’s also about the church, the body, everywhere

Not clear to me yet

Ministering to those in our congregation

Still working on it

Still no concrete responses so far

It was more difficult to point to a specific new understanding or missional focus. However there was a shifting of ideas, present practices were challenged, and new ideas were entertained in the study of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul’s model for mission.

The third global question was “Has a communal practice of Scripture study had an effect on Slifers’ Community, its internal relationship and participation?”

The responses to questions on the surveys given to the communal Scripture study participants supported a view that it did have an effect. After each session of “A People of Salt and Light,” people were asked “What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today?” Here are some of the responses: “Most Positive group so far,” “Openness and Love of our Group,” “First time I openly disagreed with someone during a Bible Study,” “Great discussion,” “Love is important to use at all times in community,” “A lot of discussion,” “Our church is working together,” and “Each one has purpose to share the message of what this Bible is saying together” (Appendix A2).

In the closing survey of “A People of Salt and Light,” there are some responses to the question, “Please share any new perspectives you received about Jesus’ Model for Community.” “How important individual spiritual growth is within and mission and calls us,” “We try to do this, I think we are family,” “How people don’t see and hear sharpness,” “Concept: Contract community,” and “Love of God, Love of Neighbor” (Appendix A3).

Respondents felt an openness to participate, an acceptance of each other, and a joy in hearing what people had to say who sat on the other side of the church from time to time on Sunday morning. These studies were a joy for this researcher as well. The studies offered an opportunity to listen to others’ interpretation of Scripture and how it affected them. The four who responded directly had this to say about this global question.

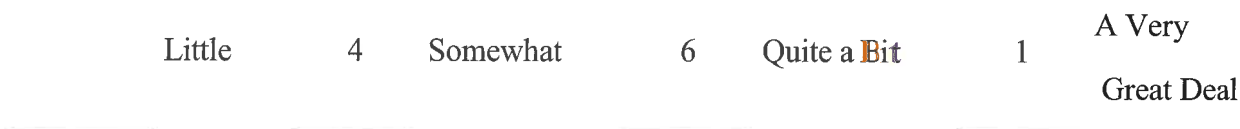
1. I feel members of Slifers are now looking at what we do and how we do it. It is now okay to raise questions about what is most important to us individually and as a membership.
2. Participation was higher than I expected when we started this project, which indicated to me that many members felt there was a need to study together and to find a closer relationship with God's Word and with each other. I believe that the sharing which took place in these sessions has fostered closer ties among members as well as a better understanding of the Scriptures studied. Hopefully this will extend to a desire to participate in future studies.
3. Yes, Personal Growth, Spiritual Growth of individuals through participation with small group Bible/Topic studies helps all community involved.
4. Summarizing the statements—our internal relationships and participation together would be a positive force in the lives of those we come in contact with. Our enthusiasm, community spirit, and involvement with each other would be a light to world around us.

The fourth global question that the researcher asked was “Has the communal practice of Scripture study had an effect on Slifers’ connection with God, their understanding of God, listening to God?” This is an ambitious question. There were very few direct references in the surveys to a change or deepening of people’s connection with God. In the “Co-missioned” opening survey people gave these responses to these two questions.



1) “What do you think are the benefits of the whole Church studies we have had so far? A couple of the answers were, “Help us focus on goals, Spirit lead,” “Getting folks to read Scriptures and see how God is speaking to us—now and for years to come.”

2) Do you think these whole church studies have had a Spiritual impact on the Church?



Please name some.

One person answered “We take the matters we discuss to heart and really think on what God wanted us to take from them” (Appendix B1). The second respondent to the global question said “As a member of the Vision Panel, I would say that we experienced firsthand the leading of the Holy Spirit when we set out to deliberately pray daily for that ‘leading.’ I hope this will be the beginning of more conscious ‘listening’ on the part of the congregation and various groups within the congregation.” (Appendix C)

The above people point to a change or a deepening connection with God. Some noted the importance of Scripture reading in listening to God, some people noted that there was a spiritual impact on the community.

The last Global question the researcher asked was “What insights has the congregation received from these studies?”

Here are the insights from the four respondents.

1. I recently received a Thank You note from a member stating “the Vision Statement is very powerful.” The note continued on stating “The first time I read it I felt energy to ‘go do it!’ I feel the spirit each time I read it.”

2. I’m not sure about the insights the congregation received, but I would say there was a positive response to the action and energy indicated in the Vision statement.

My personal insight is that the end result, the Vision, may not be the best part of this process. The best part of it is the doing, the studying, the questioning, the praying, the sharing, and the willingness to make time for it. The energy generated from these activities indicates that we are open to God’s transformation which would seem to ready us for whatever God has in store for us.

3. Understanding what Slifers’ community [can do] with minor changes or New goals[;] can Reach Potential through small group studies

4. New insights include the need to go beyond our own walls, get involved with people who are not like us, share the spirit and joy we receive each week in each other’s company to the disenfranchised, unchurched, and those members missing from worship each week. (See Appendix C.)

This researcher, after having participated in the studies, soaked in the data, analyzed it, and reviewed the survey answers, can say without hesitation that during these communal Scripture studies there has been a shift—from speaking and thinking a lot about participation in church and about the numbers changed—to believing we are able to do what it is that we are called to do. There has been a shift—from adopting a mission we would like to adopt—to knowing that God has a mission and we just need to discern what it is. That we hear the

voice of God through each other, that through these studies together there is much energy and joy. In short, a shift away from us and toward God.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **REFLECTIONS, SUMMARY, AND CONCLUSION**

Slifers Presbyterian Church is in an ongoing effort to revitalize began a three-year process of discovering / discerning / and embodying a new vision. The Session of Slifers decided to take a more comprehensive approach to the issue of focus, of listening to God, and of meeting the challenge of its mission in a changing world. The researcher had participated in or led several efforts at congregational renewal and renewal at a Presbytery level. In the past the emphasis was in their searching for the mission that churches felt called to take on, for example the Homework Assistance Program in Merrill. These mission programs came about in worshipping communities; however the mission choice has been less driven by Scripture study and more by context, Percepts Studies, church histories, and community circumstance.

This researcher has been profoundly changed by this study. Prior to this project the emphasis has always been placed on searching for a mission for the churches that he has served and his work in the Presbytery. Through committee work, through discernment of need, through connections between church and community, a mission will be discerned and discovered. This work still needs to happen, and it is a part of Slifers' work of discovering, discerning, and embodying. The work of listening to God was a part but many times not a central part.

Secondly, the vision that the leadership discerned in the recent past did not take hold in the congregation as a whole. This researcher was really amazed at how such a simple thing, albeit well thought out and executed, could have such a profound effect on both of those issues. The church setting aside time as a community to listen to God changed our perspective and deepened our relationships.

As mentioned earlier, the Center for Parish Development likes to say that God's mission needs a church. It is the church's work to discern what God is up to, not to begin a mission looking for God's blessing. Slifers and the pastor realized this was the journey that they wanted to go on. So they began their three-year "Journey of Congregational Transformation" with the guidance of the Center, incorporating three phases of learning and activity tailored to fit Slifers life and local circumstances.

The three phases of the "Journey of the People of God" are "Discovering, Discerning, and Embodying." At the center of this journey were three Scripture studies designed to help the congregation discover God's mission for them.

So they began with a search for Biblical foundation. It was fun to discover how much the people of Judah in that important turning point participated in listening to a word from the Lord. The Old Testament always features a prophet, a Priest, or a King voicing, teaching, telling the people. It was fun to discover something not expected that together as a community the returning exiles discerned a word from God for them. In the same way people in the new Christian communities or house churches devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and prayer. The early Christian community was in many ways like a close-knit rural church. Scripture reading was essential in discerning a

way forward for the community in Nehemiah's time and in the time of Acts. If people are left only to their thoughts and ideas there are a myriad of ideas and possibilities.

John Calvin carried that idea forward and spoke of a Priesthood of all believers, who all have access to God's word through the Holy Spirit. This understanding of revelation by and through the people is foundational. Indeed Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say it is the seat of revelation.

The researcher found many authors who spoke not only of the importance of Scripture reading in community to help in discerning its vision, but also that the community allowing itself to be challenged grows deeper in its relationships. Fowl, Burgess, and Finger spoke of this at length in their books, and especially Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*.

Both community and Scripture reading go hand in hand. "If we experience a sense of deeper community together, we may read Scripture with greater unanimity. Conversely, a renewed sense of Scripture's capacity to mediate an encounter with Christ may contribute to a renewal of church unity."<sup>1</sup> The engagement of the community and Scripture are needed for discernment in the Church.

So how did it all turn out? One can say that there was a definite positive relationship. There was a shift in thinking less about numbers and about participation and more to listening to God to discover God's mission for Slifers. The concern about how many came to this study, shifted into a joy of being together in community, a thankfulness for each person's contribution, and for the challenge of reading and interpreting God's word. People did not walk away from the studies with a sense that our

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<sup>1</sup> Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*. *Why Scripture Matters*. 121.

mission statement fit but that we needed a vision to pull us forward. A vision panel of people who had been to all the Scripture studies and events used a guide provided by the Center as they discerned a vision.

The people in the church felt that the vision fit exactly who they were and the direction Slifers needs to go in. As one person stated, “I recently received a Thank You note from a member stating ‘the Vision Statement is very powerful.’ The note continued on stating ‘The first time I read it I felt energy to “go do it!” I feel the spirit each time I read it” (Appendix C).

Another exciting outcome was that the Coordinating committee who was charged with organizing the Bible studies and other events realized the importance of the Scripture studies and wrote their own study to help the congregation discern even on a deeper level the new vision (Appendix D) . The church completed the congregational Scripture studies, they have discerned a new vision, and they are excited about it. The people grew closer, there is more energy among the people, and there is a deeper sense of belonging because the studies included the whole congregation. As one person said “I believe that the sharing which took place in these sessions has fostered closer ties among members as well as a better understanding of the Scriptures studied” (Appendix C). The congregation has a direction and they are poised to put into effect what they have discerned, the pattern on how to do that has been set.

In the introduction it was noted that many books have been written to assist churches in discerning a new mission or vision. Most of them include methods, processes, and ideas to look at themselves, at their strengths past and present, and at the community and its demographic. Studies such as Percepts look at the church’s past,

present, and needs. All of those points are still important to look at and consider, and the Center for Parish Development has excellent material to help the church. However, if someone would want to duplicate this study it would be necessary to place communal Scripture study at its center. A communal Scripture study designed to help the community be challenged and grow as a community—a communal Scripture study through which the people could hear a word from the Lord.



## **APPENDIX A**

### **“A PEOPLE OF SALT AND LIGHT” BIBLE STUDY SURVEY RESULTS**



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “A People of Salt & Light” Jesus Model for Community Opening Survey

**How often have you participated in a Bible Study?**

4 Little      3 Somewhat      6 Quite a Bit      1 A Very Great Deal

**How often have you participated in a Bible Study along with the whole church?**

5 Little      3 Somewhat      4 Quite a Bit      2 A Very Great Deal

**How helpful do you believe Bible Study is in helping Slifers make decisions concerning our future?**

         Little      2 Somewhat      8 Quite a Bit      4 A Very Great Deal

**What are your expectations for this Bible Study?**

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

- L To learn more about the Bible, grow and strengthen relationship with fellow members
  - P Connect with others in their belief in Jesus Christ
  - L To gain more knowledge and apply it to daily living
  - L Look at bible Scriptures in a different perspective
  - L Learn more, share experiences with each other
  - L Learn more about bible
  - P Share God's word
  - S Fill me with the spirit
  - L A clearer understanding of Scripture!
  - M We'll be struck by overpowering clear vision for our church!
  - M Focus for future of the congregation
  - M By the titles I hope it will help with the Vision Panel
  - P Give us help as we discern God's will
  - P Discussion / groups small
  - L Bring a new perspective to "old" passages
- (Learn = 7, Participate = 4, Mission = 3, Spirit = 1)

**Have you participated in discerning God's missional call to Slifers before? If so what helped you do that?**

Yes, group participation

Yes, it is important to be active in ones faith

No

Yes, dream building and sharing roads

Yes

Yes

Yes

Direction from the Presbytery

Internally more than externally, CAMP

A study during year 2000 when we came up with the current mission statement

Not greatly – potentially my child

**Has Bible Study helped you make a change of course in your life in the past?**

Not sure

1 Little      8 Somewhat      4 Quite a Bit      \_\_\_\_\_ A Very Great Deal

**Has Bible Study helped the Church make a change of course in the past.**

Don't know

2 Little      5 Somewhat      4 Quite a Bit      \_\_\_\_\_ A Very Great Deal

**Are new perspectives needed about what it might mean for Slifers Presbyterian Church to more faithfully and fruitfully participate in God's mission in Farmersville?**

Why limit to one area, there are other needs to be considered

\_\_\_\_\_ Little      6 Somewhat      5 Quite a Bit      \_\_\_\_\_ A Very Great Deal

**a. What are the issues or needs Slifers is being called to address?**

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

- L** Leadership training for members
  - P** More participation from all members
  - M** What their mission is and what do we as Slifers see God guiding us to do
  - P** Youth
  - M** Economy issues effect several families young and old
  - M** How to relate to community we live in
  - P** Membership – quality and quantity
  - P** Are we OK as a small membership church
  - M** Poor in the community
  - M** Reach the unchurched
  - P** Age of membership determine style / creativity of studies / lessons / service times etc.
- (Learn = 1, Participate = 5, Mission = 5, Spirit = 0)

**b. What kinds of practices or activities is Slifers being called to grow strong in?**

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

- P** Youth activities / young adult participation
  - S** Music / worship
  - P** Plays, etc.
  - S** Following God's direction
  - P** Membership
  - M** Reach Out
  - P** More children & youth involved
  - M** More outreach to poor
  - ☐ **P** Its care membership – which is utilized in every aspect of the church
- (Learn = 0, Participate = 5, Mission = 2, Spirit = 2)

### Is it easier to study Scripture by yourself or with others?

Need both

## 2 Yourself

6 Others

1 Little

5      Somewhat

## 1 Quite a Bit

## A Very Great Deal

**Has God's missional call to Slifers changed in the course of your membership?**

## Sunday School

## 2 Little

4 Somewhat

## 7 Quite a Bit

## A Very Great Deal

**Name one or two missional focuses or visions Slifers worked towards in past.**

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

**P** Small groups

**P** Fund raisers – working together

## M Heifer project

### P Ice cream socials

**P** UPW projects

**M** Local community mission thru CAMP

**M** Community outreach

**M** Giving more to foreign missions

**M** PW adopted a foreign child

**M** Benevolences thru our budget to Presbytery causes

## S Evangelism programs

## P Visitations in homes

### M Community charities outside of religion

## P Our past as a church

(Learn = 0, Participate = 6, Mission = 7, Spirit = 1)

**Do you see yourself as a part of the church?**

Little

1 Somewhat

## 10 Quite a Bit

### 3 A Very Great Deal

**Do you see yourself as a part of the mission of the church?**

Little

3 Somewhat

## 9 Quite a Bit

## 2 A Very Great Deal



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “A People of Salt & Light” Jesus Model for Community Session 1-4 Survey Compilation

**Did you feel free to participate in the discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little      1 Somewhat      14 Quite a Bit      20 A Very Great Deal

**Is there something you would like to spend more time on, or add as a topic to our study together?**

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

- ☐ **L** I think the framework is going to be fine
- ☐ **L** It was great
- ☐ **L** Like how it is going so far
- ☐ **P** Youth involvement
- ☐ **M** I think we should spend time on addressing the functions of our church in modern society
- ☐ **L** Reflect more into what the words are saying and why
- ☐ No
- ☐ No
- ☐ **M** Our work or mission as a community to outside to others
- ☐ **M** Continue small group Bible Study

(Learn = 4, Participate = 1, Mission = 3, Spirit = 0)

**Were you engaged in discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little      6 Somewhat      16 Quite a Bit      13 A Very Great Deal

**What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today.****(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)**

- ☐ L New perspectives on Beatitudes
  - ☐ S How we need to strive to be like each Beatitude
  - ☐ L Mourn, specific translations which make you think in a different way
  - ☐ L A new way of interpreting some of the Beatitudes
  - ☐ L How everything ties to the Beatitudes – amazing
  - ☐ S How each Beatitude ties into each other and how much God wants us to ask for forgiveness because everyone makes mistakes
  - ☐ L Beatitudes – interesting points
  - ☐ L I thought it was interesting how a typical phrase like “salt of the earth” could generate so many different discussions from us
  - ☐ L A lot of discussion
  - ☐ P I felt it very neat that there were 3 generations gathered as one
  - ☐ P Great discussion
  - ☐ S I feel better going out than I did coming in
  - ☐ S Each one has purpose to share the message at what this bible is saying together
  - ☐ L Different discussions thoughts & ideas
  - ☐ L Gifts and tasks discussion was enlightening
  - ☐ S First time I openly disagreed with someone during bible study
  - ☐ S Matthew
  - ☐ S Loving yourself
  - ☐ S Openness and love of our group
  - ☐ M How to become a better person in my church and community
  - ☐ P Our church is working together
  - ☐ S How to cope with anger
  - ☐ S Love is important to use at all times in community
  - ☐ S Most positive group so far!
  - ☐ S How dealing with anger is tough in everyday life
  - ☐ S Pray, pray, pray
  - ☐ L Jesus has provided us positive and direct explanations about how we should deal with our community
  - ☐ L Learning our strengths as people of light
- (Learn = 9, Participate = 3, Mission = 1, Spirit = 13)**



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “A People of Salt & Light” Jesus Model for Community Session 1-4 Survey Compilation

**Did you feel free to participate in the discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little      1 Somewhat      14 Quite a Bit      20 A Very Great Deal

**Is there something you would like to spend more time on, or add as a topic to our study together?**

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

**L** I think the framework is going to be fine

**L** It was great

**L** Like how it is going so far

**P** Youth involvement

**M** I think we should spend time on addressing the functions of our church in modern society

**L** Reflect more into what the words are saying and why

No

No

**M** Our work or mission as a community to outside to others

**M** Continue small group Bible Study

(Learn = 4, Participate = 1, Mission = 3, Spirit = 0)

**Were you engaged in discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little      6 Somewhat      16 Quite a Bit      13 A Very Great Deal

**What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today.**

**(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)**

- L New perspectives on Beatitudes
  - S How we need to strive to be like each Beatitude
  - L Mourn, specific translations which make you think in a different way
  - L A new way of interpreting some of the Beatitudes
  - L How everything ties to the Beatitudes – amazing
  - S How each Beatitude ties into each other and how much God wants us to ask for forgiveness because everyone makes mistakes
  - L Beatitudes – interesting points
  - L I thought it was interesting how a typical phrase like “salt of the earth” could generate so many different discussions from us
  - L A lot of discussion
  - P I felt it very neat that there were 3 generations gathered as one
  - P Great discussion
  - S I feel better going out than I did coming in
  - S Each one has purpose to share the message at what this bible is saying together
  - L Different discussions thoughts & ideas
  - L Gifts and tasks discussion was enlightening
  - S First time I openly disagreed with someone during bible study
  - S Matthew
  - S Loving yourself
  - S Openness and love of our group
  - M How to become a better person in my church and community
  - P Our church is working together
  - S How to cope with anger
  - S Love is important to use at all times in community
  - S Most positive group so far!
  - S How dealing with anger is tough in everyday life
  - S Pray, pray, pray
  - L Jesus has provided us positive and direct explanations about how we should deal with our community
  - L Learning our strengths as people of light
- (Learn = 9, Participate = 3, Mission = 1, Spirit = 13)**



## **APPENDIX B**

### **“CO-MISSIONED” BIBLE STUDY SURVEY RESULTS**



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “Co-Missioned” Opening Survey

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

Is this your first time participating this series of Bible Studies?    6    Yes    5    No

### What are your expectations for this Bible Study?

- L I feel like from these sessions will come a greater understanding of the law and more over the lessons we can learn from each other
- M Clarity for Slifers vision
- P Lively discussion
- L Better understanding of God's expectations
- L Learn more, hear more from others
- L Not sure
- L Gain more knowledge
- L Understanding the Scripture better
- M Answers to our movements into the future

(Learn = 6, Participate = 1, Mission = 2, Spirit = 0)

### What do you think are the benefits of the whole Church studies we have had so far?

- P Coming together as a church and discussing matters that bring unity to us
- P Excellent for all of us to study the same Bible studies
- L Sharing of ideas – gaining different perspectives
- P Participation has been better than I expected. It's great to learn / study with a different group
- L Better ideas about Bible and each other
- S Help us focus on goals, Spirit lead
- P Sharing thoughts
- L Gain better understanding on a different / new insight
- L Learning more
- S Getting folks to read Scriptures and see how God is speaking to us – now and for years to come

(Learn = 4, Participate = 4, Mission = 0, Spirit = 2)

### Do you think these whole church studies have had a Spiritual impact on the Church?

       Little    4    Somewhat    6    Quite a Bit    1    A Very Great Deal

### Please name some.

- S We take the matters we discuss to heart and really think on what God wanted us to take from them
- P All thinking same topics
- L Better understanding of who we are and where we are going
- S Sharing life experiences with each other, dreaming
- S Acceptance of everyone's expression of opinions

(Learn = 1, Participate = 1, Mission = 0, Spirit = 3)

**Have these whole church studies had a Spiritual impact on you?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little        4   Somewhat        6   Quite a Bit      \_\_\_\_\_ A Very Great Deal

**Please name some.**

**S** I really thought on the feedback that was received and the cultural bonding brought to us by these sessions

**L** New insights

**S** Better understanding of Scripture and spiritual witness

**S** More focus using reading to learn action

**S** No one is right, no one is wrong, individualism united by group

(Learn = 1, Participate = 1, Mission = 0, Spirit = 3)

**Has your understanding of the issues and opportunities for Slifers changed or become clearer since we began Scouting for the Spirit?**

  1   Little        8   Somewhat        1   Quite a Bit      \_\_\_\_\_ A Very Great Deal

**Can you give some examples?**

I marked somewhat because I think what we're talking about is far bigger than just Slifers; it's also about the church, the body, everywhere

Not clear to me yet

Ministering to those in our congregation

Still working on it

Still no concrete answers so far



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “Co-Missioned” How is it Going? Session 2 - Mark

(Learn = 9, Participate = 2, Mission = 0, Spirit = 11)

**Did you feel free to participate in the discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_ Little        3   Somewhat        7   Quite a Bit        3   A Very Great Deal

**If Slifers would adopt Mark's model of mission – a community proclaiming the Gospel – what would be different?**

- L** Need to think more about
- S** More enthusiasm
- S** Greater community spirit
- M** More proclamation to neighborhood, our own work place, etc.
- P** I think there would be a great deal more listeners to the things being preached, not only more preachers
- M** I feel Slifers serves many already
- S** More people should give their testimony and also try to encourage people to attend Slifers at least inviting them
- S** A special relationship would develop to praise God

(Learn = 1, Participate = 1, Mission = 2, Spirit = 4)

**Were you engaged in discussion today?**

  6   Little        2   Somewhat        5   Quite a Bit        1   A Very Great Deal

**What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today?**

- L** Background info / history was very good
- L** People then and now mirror each other
- L** Example from 5 discipline leadership and direction from following Jesus
- L** History of disciples
- L** How things are so different but some things so similar when look back into history
- L** About the four gospel writers and what their reasons were for those they were writing to
- L** More of a historical perspective on Scripture
- L** Differences in the gospels and the time they were written and to whom
- L** I thought it was interesting how we took the message and applied it to today; discussing the media, culture, youth, etc.
- Do it yourself
- S** About the snakes and laying on of hands, was it literal or figurative, or both?
- P** People can share their feelings

(Learn = 9, Participate = 1, Mission = 0, Spirit = 1)

**Do we in today's church participate in service, suffering, or sacrifice? Is one lacking more, should it be emphasized more?**

**L** Mostly service, I think

**L** Some

???

Examples of sacrifice

**S** Sacrifice – we do little

**M** Service should be emphasized more

**L** Not sure we sacrifice much

**L** I think different people contribute different amounts but I don't think the church as a whole suffers in everyday life

**S** Maybe sacrifice – sometimes people don't feel like going through the effort to attend

**S** Yes in many different ways

**(Learn = 4, Participate = 0, Mission = 1, Spirit = 3)**



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “Co-Missioned” How is it Going? Session 2 - Mark

(Learn = 9, Participate = 2, Mission = 0, Spirit = 11)

**Did you feel free to participate in the discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little        3   Somewhat        7   Quite a Bit        3   A Very Great Deal

**If Slifers would adopt Mark's model of mission – a community proclaiming the Gospel – what would be different?**

- L** Need to think more about
- S** More enthusiasm
- S** Greater community spirit
- M** More proclamation to neighborhood, our own work place, etc.
- P** I think there would be a great deal more listeners to the things being preached, not only more preachers
- M** I feel Slifers serves many already
- S** More people should give their testimony and also try to encourage people to attend Slifers at least inviting them
- S** A special relationship would develop to praise God

(Learn = 1, Participate = 1, Mission = 2, Spirit = 4)

**Were you engaged in discussion today?**

  6   Little        2   Somewhat        5   Quite a Bit        1   A Very Great Deal

**What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today?**

- L** Background info / history was very good
- L** People then and now mirror each other
- L** Example from 5 discipline leadership and direction from following Jesus
- L** History of disciples
- L** How things are so different but some things so similar when look back into history
- L** About the four gospel writers and what their reasons were for those they were writing to
- L** More of a historical perspective on Scripture
- L** Differences in the gospels and the time they were written and to whom
- L** I thought it was interesting how we took the message and applied it to today; discussing the media, culture, youth, etc.
- Do it yourself**
- S** About the snakes and laying on of hands, was it literal or figurative, or both?
- P** People can share their feelings

(Learn = 9, Participate = 1, Mission = 0, Spirit = 1)

**Do we in today's church participate in service, suffering, or sacrifice? Is one lacking more, should it be emphasized more?**

**L** Mostly service, I think

**L** Some

???

Examples of sacrifice

**S** Sacrifice – we do little

**M** Service should be emphasized more

**L** Not sure we sacrifice much

**L** I think different people contribute different amounts but I don't think the church as a whole suffers in everyday life

**S** Maybe sacrifice – sometimes people don't feel like going through the effort to attend

**S** Yes in many different ways

**(Learn = 4, Participate = 0, Mission = 1, Spirit = 3)**



## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “Co-Missioned” Session 3, John

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

**Did you feel free to participate in the discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little        2   Somewhat        5   Quite a Bit        2   A Very Great Deal

**If Slifers would adopt John's model of mission – as a sent community – what would be different?**

**S** We would be a positive force in the lives of those we come in contact and if it be God's will they too would become involved

We're doing fine

**S** Ways to support

**M** We would go to areas that are in need, not just send money

**M** Working together for peace

**S** Folks might begin to notice

**S** We would enjoy participating in the world rather than being condemning

(Learn = 0, Participate = 0, Mission = 2, Spirit = 4)

**Were you engaged in discussion today?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Little        4   Somewhat        4   Quite a Bit        1   A Very Great Deal

**What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today?**

**M** We can be different but still have the same mission

**S** Learned what a struggle it is for people in business-time constraints

**S** How important the Holy Spirit is needed

**S** Reminder: our actions speak louder than we realize at times

**S** We admit we are not as perfect as we want to think!

**L** Others opinions and discussion

(Learn = L, Participate = 0, Mission = 1, Spirit = 4)

**What difference does the Holy Spirit make in the life of the church? What effect do you see?**

**S** It is the energy that make the life of the church a real force in people's lives

**S** Without the Spirit we are not a church

**S** Feel it in joy of worship, care of each other, responsibility

**S** We feel and express joy in worship and in our lives

**S** Very much, excitement for life

**S** Brings life to the church – enthusiasm

**S** ALL of the difference!

**S** Spirit = Enthusiasm

(Learn = 0, Participate = 0, Mission = 0, Spirit = 8)





## Slifers Presbyterian Survey “Co-Missioned” Closing Survey

(L=Learn, P=Participate, M=Mission, S=Spirit)

### SURVEY FOR TODAY

**If Slifers would adopt Paul's model of mission – as a community of reconciliation – what would be different?**

- S Forgiveness of sins
- Not sure
- Good question
- S Forgiving more
- S Accept others opinions and find compromises

(Learn = 0, Participate = 0, Mission = 0, Spirit = 3)

**What one thing did you learn or that was interesting today?**

- P Open discussion
- S Struggling makes us grow, not only as an individual but spiritually too
- S Reconciliation
- L Presbyterians, I thought were always more tolerant
- S Agreeing to disagree in tolerance and love

(Learn = 1, Participate = 1, Mission = 0, Spirit = 3)

**Taking our cues from the Good News that we are reconciled to God, what would a ministry of reconciliation look like for the church?**

- P Open and honest
- P Continue acceptance of each other
- S It already is a church of reconciliation
- S Finding ways to forgive and bring people together

(Learn = 1, Participate = 1, Mission = 0, Spirit = 3)

### SURVEY FOR WHOLE STUDY

**Write down 3 words that describe what you learned about mission in this Bible Study.**

- L Learning more about community
- S Forgiveness
- S Holy Spirit
- S Be humble
- S Be open
- L History
- P People's thoughts
- M Slifer's is full of mission daily
- S Tolerance
- M We already do a lot!
- M Go to the disenfranchised
- S Be one mind
- S Be one peace

(Learn = 2, Participate = 1, Mission = 3, Spirit = 7)

**How caught up in the discussions concerning these passages were you?**

  1   Little        3   Somewhat        1   Quite a Bit        2   A Very Great Deal

**Were you able to attend....of the studies?**

       First             Second        1   Third        1   Fourth        4   Fifth

**Please share any inspiration or new perspectives you received about 5 Models for mission.**

Reconciliation takes work

**Which of the models resonated most with you? Why do you suppose that one did?**

Holy Spirit

Sent community – go help in person

**There are many issues facing the church (e.g., activity weary, less commitment, church considered to be a place to get something, concern for size, concern for survival, concern about being effective). What new insights did this Bible Study give you concerning those issues?**

We are all aware, BUT no easy answers

God can use any size congregation we can be a light for the whole world

**Do you think these whole church studies have had a Spiritual impact on the Church?**

       Little        3   Somewhat        2   Quite a Bit             A Very Great Deal

**In what way?**

For those who participated more awareness perhaps

Open discussion, studying together, growing an understanding of our mission

**Did these whole church studies have a Spiritual impact on you?**

       Little        4   Somewhat        1   Quite a Bit        1   A Very Great Deal

**In what way?**

Helped me come back to a belief in prayer

**APPENDIX C**  
**GLOBAL QUESTIONS**  
**RESPONDENTS' SURVEY RESULTS**

## INDIVIDUAL SURVEYS

Has a communal practice of Scripture study had an effect on the church's discernment of their missional call? Describe this effect.

1. **The studies were important to our wording of the Vision Statement. Ideas and some specific words were taken from the collection of chart papers from the studies.**
2. **The series of Bible studies in which the congregation participated laid the groundwork for our understanding that God's creation and re-creation of each of us continues and our acceptance of this transforming power of God is an ongoing and never-ending relationship between God and his people. Thus it becomes necessary to periodically evaluate and attempt to 'discern' where God is leading us now, in 2011 and beyond.**
3. *10 – 24 participation on Average and willingness to Participate and several responses that Bible Study in Small groups are powerful at the personanel and group levels*
4. From the discussion above, the communal Scripture study helped members to see that size does not count and that we have much to offer, though small. They learned that discussion and Bible study together gives different insights and clarity to the Scriptures, and that we accept all opinions without judgment of persons. Other comments revolved around the need to reach out beyond our doors – sharing the Word as well as reaching out to the poor, unchurched, and our own non-attending members.

Answers from the surveys Respondent 4. Thought were pertinent

To learn more about the bible, grow and strengthen relationship with fellow members

Connect with others in their belief in Jesus Christ

Share God's word

Fill me with the spirit

A clearer understanding of Scripture

We'll be struck by overpowering clear vision for our church

Give us help as we discern God's will

How important the Holy Spirit is needed

Reminder: our actions speak louder than we realize at times

For those who participated, more awareness perhaps

Open discussion, studying together, growing an understanding of our mission

Greater understanding of the law and more over the lessons we can learn from each other

Clarity for Slifers vision

Better understanding of God's expectations

Understanding the Scripture better

Reach the unchurched

Age of membership determines style / creativity of studies / lessons / service times, etc.

Youth activities / young adult participation

Following God's direction

More children & youth involved  
 More outreach to poor  
 A community in faith can be any size  
 Larger does not always equate to better. Small churches can and do follow (or attempt to follow) the radical love we learned about. If we are about love, we will be blessed, no matter our size  
 Numbers are not important! People are!  
 Each one has purpose to share the message at what this bible is saying together  
 First time I openly disagreed with someone during bible study  
 Jesus has provided us positive and direct explanations about how we should deal with our community  
 Learning our strengths as people of light

Has a communal practice of Scripture study had an effect on Slifer's Community, its internal relationship and participation? Describe this effect.

5. **I feel members of Slifers are now looking at what we do and how we do it. It is now okay to raise questions about what is most important to us individually and as a membership.**
6. **Participation was higher than I expected when we started this project which indicated to me that many members felt there was a need to study together and to find a closer relationship with God's Word and with each other. I believe that the sharing which took place in these sessions has fostered closer ties among members as well as a better understanding of the Scriptures studied. Hopefully this will extend to a desire to participate in future studies.**
7. ***Yes Personal Growth, Spiritual Growth of individuals through participation with small group Bible/Topic studies helps all community involved***
8. Summarizing the statements – our internal relationships and participation together would be a positive force in the lives of those we come in contact with. Our enthusiasm, community spirit and involvement with each other would be a light to world around us.

Answers from the surveys Respondent 4. Thought were pertinent

More enthusiasm

Greater community spirit

More proclamation to neighborhood, our own work place, etc.

More people should give their testimony and also try to encourage people to attend Slifers at least inviting them

A special relationship would develop to praise God

We would be a positive force in the lives of those we come in contact and if it be God's will, they too would become involved

We would go to areas that are in need, not just send money

Folks might begin to notice

We would enjoy participating in the world rather than being condemning

We would reach out more to our neighbors

We would identify more clearly how our actions connect the dots

We would develop a positive relationship with each other and reach to our community  
 More concern for poor, homeless, imprisoned, oppressed  
 Good discussion on Slifers current practice of mission and that we can find ways to do more  
 We are where we are supposed to be  
 That we are called to proclaim even if it's not a grand event  
 Reminded that it's the little things that can mean the most- one by one we can make a difference  
 Different opinions often lead to the same conclusion  
 We can change when we learn how to connect with God through the Scripture  
 More of God's idea of a better world

Summarizing the statements – our internal relationships and participation together would be a positive force in the lives of those we come in contact with. Our enthusiasm, community spirit and involvement with each other would be a light to world around us.

Has a communal practice of Scripture study had an effect on Slifers connection with God, their understanding of God, listening to God? Describe this effect.

1. **I feel the integrating of the studies into small groups, service on Sunday morning, and off-campus activities has put the Scripture studies and the results of the study, the understanding of the study, into the forefront of members' minds.**
2. **As a member of the Vision Panel I would say that we experienced first hand the leading of the Holy Spirit when we set out to deliberately pray daily for that 'leading'. I hope this will be the beginning of more conscious 'listening' on the part of the congregation and various groups within the congregation.**
3. ***Yes and No- Each person has different relationship and understanding with God and Slifers will effect Slifers Community***
4. Most answers revolve around the issue of forgiveness and the need to confess, reconciliation between people in love, acceptance of each other as God expects, and with better understanding of Scripture, we could be better spiritual witnesses

Answers from the surveys Respondent 4. Thought were pertinent

Forgiveness of sins

Accept others opinions and find compromises

Struggling makes us grow, not only as an individual but spiritually too

Reconciliation

Agreeing to disagree in tolerance and love

Forgiveness

Be humble

Be open

People's thoughts

Tolerance

Go to the disenfranchised

Be of one mind  
 Be of one peace  
 Help us focus on goals, Spirit led  
 Getting folks to read Scriptures and see how God is speaking to us – now and for years to come  
 Better understanding of Scripture and spiritual witness  
 No one is right, no one is wrong, individualism united by group  
 We take the matters we discuss to heart and really think on what God wanted us to take from them  
 Open and honest  
 Continue acceptance of each other  
 Finding ways to forgive and bring people together

What insights has the congregation received from these studies?

1. **I recently received a Thank You note from a member stating “the Vision Statement is very powerful.” The note continued on stating “The first time I read it I felt energy to ‘go do it!’ I feel the spirit each time I read it.”**
2. **I’m not sure about the insights the congregation received, but I would say there was a positive response to the action and energy indicated in the Vision statement.**  
**My personal insight is that the end result, the Vision, may not be the best part of this process. The best part of it is the doing, the studying, the questioning, the praying, the sharing, the willingness to make time for it. The energy generated from these activities indicates that we are open to God’s transformation which would seem to ready us for whatever God has in store for us.**
3. ***Understanding what Slifers community and with minor changes or New goals can Reach Potential through small group studies***
4. New insights include the need to go beyond our own walls, get involved with people who are not like us, share the spirit and joy we receive each week in each other’s company to the disenfranchised, unchurched, and those members missing from worship each week.

Answers from the surveys Respondent 4. Thought were pertinent

How important individual spiritual growth is within, and mission, and calls us

How well the Sermon on the Mount applies to the community

Love of God

Love of neighbor

We must be set apart from the world’s values and live Jesus’ values. We must carry Jesus’ values into the world

The bible study applicable to multiple generations turns this into a house church

Loving others outside the “boundaries” of church

More outreach to the community

Cook at the House of Bread; plan more mission trips; bring in mission speakers; promote benevolences, Presbytery & Pw missions; get involved with CAMP more

personally; invite neighbors to worship

I don't think Slifers is in this for the attention. It is for God's mission

Welcome change

Welcoming

We are a welcoming, friendly church

As described above, we are involved with money gifts and on occasion by personal involvement

How important individual spiritual growth is within, and the mission that calls us

We must be set apart from the world's values and live Jesus' values. We must carry Jesus' values into the world

Loving others outside the "boundaries" of church

We are involved with money gifts and on occasion by personal involvement. We've only begun to understand biblical mandates to do and give sacrificially

It is the energy that makes the life of the church a real force in people's lives

Without the Spirit, we are not a church

Feel it in joy of worship, care of each other, responsibility

Spirit = Enthusiasm

Continue small group bible study

Excluded ones in today's society include: poor, handicap, homeless, hungry, ill, different religions, different color, different beliefs, those not attending church, those who do not know God and we need to share the message with others through our actions, all non-Christian people (to live as God asks us to do); the people outside the perimeter of the so called socially acceptable



**APPENDIX D1**  
VISION BIBLE STUDY  
INVITATION AND SCHEDULE



## You are invited to Slifers' Vision Bible Study

October 2011

Worship **9:15 - 10:15 AM**  
 Session Time **10:30 – 11:30 am**  
 Sunday Mornings in Sanctuary  
 Light refreshments provided

Purpose Understand and Navigate around the Vision

Session One: Why (How To) Study Scripture  
 October 2 John 1:17-18, 2Timothy 3:16, Luke 4:21

Session Two: Who is Our Community?  
 October 9 Ephesians 4:1-7, Acts 4:42-47, Luke 10 30-37

Session Three: We Move Forward Through Renewal  
 October 16 Romans 12:1-2, Isaiah 43:15-19, Colossians 3:8-15

Session Four: Let's Offer Water to a Thirsty World  
 October 23. John 7:37-39, John 4:3-30

**Special Session: Reflecting on the Vision**  
**October 30**

Dear Slifer's Community,

We have been spending time with each other, studying the Scriptures, participating in events like Conferences on the Past, and on the Present. We have been discussing the challenges churches face in this day and age.

In essence we have been listening to the Spirit to hear a Word as to what God is calling us to do. What Vision does God have for us here on the corner of Chicken Bristle and Clayton Roads? The Co-coordinating team, the Vision Panel and the Session and you have invested time in discerning a Word from the Lord. We have heard our Vision. It is printed on the back of this letter.

We would like you to take time to Pray for the Community of Slifers. That as we absorb what this vision means for us, we can take positive and concrete steps forward.

**Praying over the Vision – for times of personal reflection.**

1. Read the Vision aloud to yourself slowly.
  - a. Listen for the word or phrase that speaks to you.
2. Read the Vision aloud a second time.
  - a. Wait for an image, thought, or phrase that arises in response to the passage.
3. Read the Vision draft aloud a third time.
  - a. Pay attention to ways in which God could be inviting you to be and to act, both personally and as a congregation.
4. Pay particular attention to ways in which God may be inviting you to respond.
  - a. Are you sensing new facets to your personal ministry?
  - b. Are there some specific ways you can be in prayer for your church?
  - c. Are you sensing new ways that God might be inviting you to share in the ministry of your congregation?

## **APPENDIX D2**

### **VISION STATEMENT BIBLE STUDY**

## VISION STATEMENT BIBLE STUDY

October 2011

Sunday Mornings in Sanctuary

10:30 – 11:30 am

Snacks and drinks provided

**Purpose:** Understand the Vision Statement  
Embody the Statement as Slifer's vision

**Sessions:** October 2 – Why (How To) Study Scripture  
John 1:17-18  
2 Timothy 3:16-17  
Luke 4:20-21

October 9 – Who is Our Community?  
Ephesians 4:1-7  
Acts 2:42-47  
Luke 10:30-37

October 16 – We Move Forward Through Renewal  
Romans 12:1-2  
Isaiah 43:15-19  
Colossians 3:8-14

October 23 – Let's Offer Water to a Thirsty World.  
John 7:37-39  
John 4:4-30

**Special Session:** October 30  
Reflecting on the Vision

Group Activity:                      Vote on favorite and least-favorite book of the Bible  
Explain in one-word the reason for your selection, put in the basket

Prayer

Group Reading:

Seeking the biblical author's intended meaning necessitates interpreting Bible verses in context. Every word in the Bible is part of a verse, and every verse is part of a paragraph, and every paragraph is part of a book, and every book is part of the whole of Scripture.

No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it. Interpreting a verse apart from its context is like trying to analyze a Rembrandt painting by looking at only a single square inch of the painting, or like trying to analyze Handel's "messiah" by listening to a few short notes.

The context is absolutely critical to properly interpreting Bible verses

In interpreting Scripture, there is both an immediate context and a broader context. The immediate context of a verse is the paragraph (or paragraphs) of the biblical book in question. The immediate context should always be consulted in interpreting Bible verses.

The broader context is the whole of Scripture. The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture. We must keep in mind that the interpretation of a specific passage must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point. Individual verses do not exist as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole.

The exposition of these verses, therefore, must involve exhibiting them in right relation both to the whole and to each other. Scripture interprets Scripture. As J. I. Packer puts it, "if we would understand the parts, our wisest course is to get to know the whole."

(Taken from *Rightly Interpreting the Bible* by Ron Rhodes)

Break into groups – approximately 6 in each one.

Read scripture – use as basis for discussing questions:

Scripture: John 1:15-18  
2 Timothy 3:16-17  
Luke 4:20-21

Questions:

1. Have you ever interpreted the same passages differently at various stages of your life? If so, how do you explain the difference?
2. Is it important to memorize scripture? Why?
3. What do we do with our discussion or what have we just learned today?
4. What does a community shaped by scripture look like? Be prepared to share your answers and also put on the Vision wall in written or art form.

Bring group back together for recap. Close with prayer.

Vision Statement Bible Study  
October 9, 2011

Group Activity: Think of one of your favorite community experience and identity what made it the best.  
Describe the 'best' feeling in several words on the sheet and put it in the basket.

Previous session recap as needed

Prayer

Group Reading:

The term **community** has two distinct meanings:

- a **group** of interacting people, possibly living in close proximity, and often refers to a group that shares some common values, and is attributed with social cohesion within a shared geographical location, generally in social units larger than a household. The word can also refer to the national community or international community, and
- in **biology**, a community is a group of interacting living organisms sharing a populated environment.

In **human communities**, intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs, risks, and a number of other conditions may be present and common, affecting the identity of the participants and their degree of cohesiveness.

In **sociology**, the concept of community has led to significant debate, and sociologists are yet to reach agreement on a definition of the term. There were ninety-four discrete definitions of the term by the mid-1950s.<sup>[1]</sup>

The word **community** is derived from the Old French *communité* which is derived from the Latin *communitas* (*cum*, "with/together" + *munus*, "gift"), a broad term for fellowship or organized society.

Since the advent of the Internet, the concept of community no longer has geographical limitations, as people can now virtually gather in an online community and share common interests regardless of physical location. (Taken from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

Break into groups – approximately 6 in each one.

Read scripture – use as basis for discussing questions:



Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-7  
Acts 2:42-47  
Luke 10:30-37

Questions:

1. How do we define community – geographical, educational, social?
2. Is it important for a community to be unified to accomplish a mission project?
3. What is an oasis? How does a Christian community offer an oasis to others?
4. In the Vision Statement, it says by our unity we are able to take bold action. Give concrete definitions of unity and bold action. Be prepared to share your answers and also put on the Vision wall in written or art form.

Bring group back together for recap. Close with prayer.

Vision Statement Bible Study  
October 16, 2011

Group Activity: Have you volunteered for the Turkey Supper? Is this a long-term tradition that is important to you as a mission of the church? Put your answer on the turkey and place it in the basket.

Previous session recap as needed

Prayer

Group Reading:



Replacement windows you will love. Choose a window replacement expert.

Renewal by Andersen offers a **start-to-finish replacement process**, where you'll get **custom-crafted**, energy-efficient replacement windows and doors **professionally installed** for you. Simply request a **free in-home window consultation** and you'll be **on your way to enjoying** your beautiful new windows and patio doors for years to come. While Andersen's offers a quick expert designed start-to-finish custom-crafted process, spiritual renewal is not that simple - it is an individual life time process. Spiritual renewal in hard times is essential for well being in our spiritual journey. All around us each day, we face the negative side of life staring us in the face. Gas prices take us prisoner and a failing economy, devastating weather conditions, even television and movies saturate us with negativity. What we place our attention on is what we become. Therefore, spiritual renewal is absolutely necessary today for survival.

We were created to be happy spiritual beings. We were created to be spiritually free. We were created to accept and bring joy and happiness into our lives, the lives of our family, coworkers, the environment around us, animals and all life. This is being a co-worker with the Holy Spirit, which brings a peaceful heart in the good times and hard times. A spiritual life offers unlimited gifts and blessings. All we have to do is determine whether we want to be happy or unhappy.

Break into groups – approximately 6 in each one.

Read scripture – use as basis for discussing questions:

Scripture: Romans 12:1-2  
Isaiah 43:15-19  
Colossians 3:8-14

Questions:

1. How much effort is required for renewal? Is it worth it?
2. Do you experience renewal each time you worship?
3. How do you react to a suggested change, especially if it is a long-held tradition?
4. Who are the disenfranchised? Are they members of our community and how do we reach them? Be prepared to share your answers and also put on the Vision wall in written or art form.

Bring group back together for recap. Close with prayer.

Vision Statement Bible Study  
October 23, 2011

Group Activity: Offer a partner a cup of cold water and discuss the two cartoons. What is wrong with this picture? Think how do you like to be welcomed and put your answer in the basket.

Previous session recap as needed

Prayer

Group Reading:

Water was of great importance to the people of the Bible. They lived in a dry country, completely dependent on the seasonal rains. Fresh water was not available everywhere and the task of digging wells and cisterns was a difficult one. Such an important resource as fresh water would naturally be a picture or symbol of spiritual reality as well.

There were different types of water found in the land of Israel. Cistern water was rainwater trapped in pits dug into rock and plastered to prevent leakage. Most homes and public buildings had them. The water was often dirty, having flowed from roofs or streets into the cistern. This source of water was not dependable because one season it might not rain or the plaster might leak and the water seep away.

Running water, especially spring water, was different. It stayed fresh and clean. And most springs were dependable, providing water year round. This constant fresh source of water was called "living water," probably portraying its life-giving qualities as well as its constant freshness.

Jesus used "water" as a symbol for the Holy Spirit! He gives us the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, seal us and fill us. Notice that Jesus is talking about "rivers of living water." Rivers of living water that are flowing out of believers. We need to ask ourselves, "What kind of living waters are flowing through me? Is my spiritual faucet dripping? Can I see a steady stream? Am I experiencing a flood of living water gushing out from the inside? The Holy Spirit should make a difference in one's life. Jesus did not talk about drips of living water!

Break into groups – approximately 6 in each one.

Read scripture – use as basis for discussing questions:

Scripture:     John 7:37-39  
                  John 4:4-30

Questions:

1.     How would you assess the congregation's current ability to care for the needs of its members?
2.     How do we as a church care spiritually for those no longer able to attend on Sunday morning?
3.     In your busy schedule, do you need a formalized process to make time to care for others and listen to what they need.
4.     What is living water and what the obstacles that prevent us from offering to others? Be prepared to share your answers and also put on the Vision wall in written or art form.

Bring group back together for recap. Close with prayer.

**APPENDIX E**  
**NEW VISION STATEMENT**

**SLIFERS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**GOD'S VISION FOR OUR PRESENT AND OUR FUTURE**  
*God is living water. Let us offer a cup of water to a thirsty world.*

---

We are a group of Christian friends shaped through scripture reading and study, sent to teach and show the love of Christ.

We are a community that responds faithfully, both individually and together as a community, and by our unity are able to take bold action.

We are a people moving forward as we listen for God's direction; a people who are never done learning. Young and old, we offer ourselves - body, budget, schedule, and heart to be partners in Christ's service. We will not hide our light under a bushel on the corner of Clayton and Chicken Bristle Roads; rather, we will show the community our salt--our zest for life in Jesus Christ.

An oasis for those within our membership and for those in and around our communities, in fact, our love of God shines and radiates to all we meet. We find God's peace and joy when getting our hands and feet dirty by actively participating in the needs of others.

Our worship, filled with sacred moments, uplifting music and fellowship fills us with the Holy Spirit--leaving all with an inner joy that spreads to all we meet. We use technology and other ways to stay connected, listening to both the loud and quiet voices, with awareness of the sick, disenfranchised and other "no voice" people.

We are not afraid to change, even regularly challenging long-held traditions, in order to listen to the Spirit, pursue our mission, and serve one another in the family of Christ.

God welcomes us with a cup of cold water: the refreshing invitation from a friend to "come in." God welcomes us with a cup of cold water: a moment of shared

tears in a time of grief or loss. God welcomes us with a cup of cold water: a cleansing offer of forgiveness in a time of shame.

God is a hidden spring in the desert rock. God is an ever-flowing stream of righteousness. God is living water. Let us offer a cup of water to a thirsty world.



## **APPENDIX F**

### **“SCOUTING FOR GOD’S SPIRIT” TIME LINE**

## Scouting for God's Spirit



"We get our new life from the Spirit, as we  
should follow the Spirit." Galatians 5:25

Slifers Presbyterian Church  
2999 South Clayton Road  
Farmersville, Ohio 45342  
937) 696-2984

## **Time line:**

### **The Spiritual Formation Process**

#### **Phase One: Lent 2010**

##### **Get Ready for the Journey**

Bible Study through the sermons

#### **Phase Two: Pentecost 2010**

##### **Introducing the Process**

Kick off: Case Statement Pamphlet

#### **Phase Three: Rally Day 2010**

##### **Connecting with the Spirit**

Bible Study through the Fall

#### **Phase Four: Advent 2010**

##### **Develop a Common View of Reality**

Timeline of History of the Church

"The **Spirit** produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Galatians 5:22



## What is Planned?

On the January 30, 2010, Slifers embarked on a new journey developed by the Center for Parish Development led by Ray Schulte. This spiritual journey involves two years of bible study and discussion with other local Presbyterian churches. The journey will introduce the congregation to resources and activities designed for us to adhere to God's calling and

discover Slifer's potential growth and development. Since we live in a world of the 21st century, this journey will allow us to discover new and exciting ways to meet our missionary goals and dreams.

---

## Why is This Necessary

- ❖ To determine God's will for Slifers Presbyterian Church.
- ❖ To strengthen our relationship with God.
- ❖ To prepare for future opportunities that God has in store for us.
- ❖ To serve better our God and our brothers and sister, at home and around the world.

## What Will Result From This Effort

- ❖ We will be renewed in spirit and purpose.
- ❖ Christ will once again will be evident not only in our words, but in our actions.
- ❖ Slifers People, God's People will have scouted and discerned God's plan for us in the coming years

"But the people who trust the Lord will become strong again.

They will rise up as an eagle in the sky, they will run and not need rest, they will walk and not become tired." Isaiah 40:31

## To rise as an Eagle!

---

## Prayer for Discernment

God of Love and Mercy, you have a plan for us to serve you.

Forgive us, for using our limited human learned process of thinking, when we need to recognize and accept Your Holy Spirit. God, we know you are here to guide us on the path of our journey. Lord, we seek to fulfill the mission of Your Church in the name of Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen



**APPENDIX G1**  
**“BEHOLD” BIBLE STUDY SCHEDULE**

## **Behold: There is a New Creation**

### **Congregational Discovery and Learning**

Session Time 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm

Light refreshments and drink provided

Please bring a Bible and study booklet

Session **One:**            Becoming a People of the Dream

June 9                    Paul & Carolyn

Session **Two:**            God's Dream: The Good Creation

June 16                  Justin & Larry

Session **Three:**           The Rejection of the Dream: Broken  
June 23                   Relationships

Jenny & Thalia

Session **Four:**            The Redemption of the Dream: Healed  
July 7                    Relationships

Session **Five:**            The Manifestation of the Dream: The  
July 14                   Household of God

Session **Six:**            The Promise and the Power of the Dream:  
July 21                   God's New Creation

**APPENDIX G2**  
**“BEHOLD” BIBLE STUDY**



Behold: There is a New Creation



the Center  
for Parish  
Development

For more information about Bible studies and other resources  
to support transformation in your church, please contact:

the Center  
for Parish  
Development

The Center for Parish Development  
1448 E. 53rd Street  
Chicago, IL 60615  
773-752-1596 (voice) 773-752-5093 (fax)  
[www.missionalchurch.org](http://www.missionalchurch.org)

### BEHOLD: THERE IS A NEW CREATION

This Bible study is based upon the work of Ingrace T. Dietterich of the Center for Parish Development in collaboration with the Discernment Panel of the New Creation Initiative, Hawaii Conference United Church of Christ in 1999. Bible texts quoted, unless otherwise indicated, are from the NRSV.

## Concluding and Integrating Questions

*Working with one other person, discuss and answer these questions. Then share your responses with the larger group.*

1. Look back over your responses to the previous sessions. In particular, note your responses to the question: "What have you learned about God's dream...?" Pulling your thoughts together, what insights have you gained about God's dream? What questions have been stimulated?
2. What is the "promise and the power" of God's dream for creation?
3. In the life of your congregation, where do you experience glimpses of God's dream?
4. What would need to change in order for your congregation more fully to manifest God's dream?

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3. Among all the images in these passages, which one catches your attention?
4. How have you experienced these texts interpreted and used?

## 2 Corinthians 5:17–21: There is a New Creation

1. While it is not in the original text, many translations insert the word “he” into verse 17. What is the difference between “he is a new creation” and “there is a new creation”?
2. Who has been reconciled to whom? How?
3. What are the consequences of reconciliation?
4. What do you think it means to “become the righteousness of God?”

## Suggestions for using this Bible study

- Create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Make sure all persons in the group know one another. If possible, have coffee or other light refreshments available.
- When you gather, ask one member of your group to act as facilitator and timekeeper, to help the group stay on track and on time.
- As a reminder of the purpose, read the Introduction at the beginning of each session. Your group can decide whether or not to read aloud.
- Use the questions as a guide for your discussion. Don't get derailed by seeking the “right” answer.
- Be creative in supplementing the study: acting out texts, drawing symbols, using hymns, art objects, or poetry. Bring readings or clippings from home.
- This resource can be used in a variety of settings: in adult and youth education classes, with small groups, for church council meetings, on a congregational retreat, or as a special congregational series.
- A key component of Bible study is the experience of Christian community. Encourage persons to be open to one another, to listen to each other respectfully, and to speak the truth in love.
- Engaging in Bible study is an opportunity to hear God's voice speak in fresh ways to us. Spend time in prayer at the beginning and end of every session, asking God's Spirit to guide and enlighten the group.

We hope that this Bible study will refresh your hearts, renew your minds, and stimulate your imaginations as you consider the mission of the church in light of the biblical image “new creation.”

**the Center  
for Parish  
Development**  
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The staff of the  
Center for Parish Development

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John Driver's words in *Images of the Church in Mission* sum up our study of God's new creation as a wholistic vision of God's dream for humanity.

The church stands in the chain of God's creative acts: the creation of the ordered universe and humanity, the creation of a people which bears the Lord's name through the call of Abraham, and clearly in the Exodus-Sinai experience. Thus the church is "a kind of first fruits of God's creatures" (James 1:18). The church is a new creation and a new humanity, "the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:2; also 3:12; Galatians 4:26). It anticipates the time when God will finish "making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). This configuration of images points eloquently to the church's unique mission as God's sign of the future.

## Bible Study

*Read the texts, answer the questions with others, and then share with the whole group.*

Isaiah 65: 17-25: A Transformed Heaven and Earth  
Revelation 21:1-5a: God Dwells with Mortals

1. Who will bring about new heavens and a new earth?
2. How is the relationship between God and humanity transformed? What happens to God? What happens to humanity?

## Session 6:

## The Promise and Power of the Dream: God's New Creation

**W**e now come to the final session of our journey together. During our time together, we have explored the rich biblical story of God's dream. The plot of the story has taken us from God's good creation, through humanity's rejection and alienation from God, to the redemption of creation in Jesus Christ. As a community formed by the gifts and manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the church—God's household—is called to proclaim and to embody God's dream.

According to the New Testament, wherever the Spirit of God is at work, there God is active in a new creation. As Jesus healed minds and bodies, God's new world was inaugurated (Luke 11:20). Jesus' power was manifested not only in people made new, but also in a renewed earth set free from its "bondage to

decay" (Romans 8:21). The sea was calmed, empty wine vats were filled, and abundant provisions were provided for all (Matthew 8:23–27, John 2:3–8, Matthew 4:13–21).

Thus Paul's affirmation of new creation is much more than individuals becoming "new creatures," as important as this reality may be in personal experience. Rather than simply referring to what happens to the *individual* who comes to Christ, the passage from 2 Corinthians refers to a new *social order*. Through the events of Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost, a radically new age has begun. Jesus Christ has been rejected and killed, he was raised from the dead, and the Holy Spirit has descended upon the church. Although not yet experienced in its fullness, God's new creation has invaded and permeated the whole of created life.

## Session 1:

## Behold: There is a New Creation

*When anyone is united to Christ,*

*there is a new creation:*

*the old order has gone,*

*a new order has already begun!*

2 Corinthians 5:17 (The New English Bible)

## Becoming A People of the Dream

ation. As participants in the community of faith, as baptized Christians, we are to be a people whose identity and purpose is shaped by God's dream.

While within the church we may talk about God's will, we do not as often speak of God's "dream." Rather than a flight of fancy or wishful thinking, God's dream is a vision of what is "really real." It is a vision of the wholeness of life, the healing of a broken world. God's dream calls us beyond the world's conflict, anxiety, and confusion, to the reality of God's new creation in Jesus Christ. It is because the Christian community believes in a God who declares "See, I am making all things new" (Revelations 21:5), that it

**E**very day in a wide variety of ways the world tells us who we are and how we are to live.

Depending upon the message we listen to, we are: physical beings who are to make ourselves sexually attractive, intellectual beings who are to accumulate knowledge, consumers who are to acquire possessions, workers who are to produce products, or pleasure seekers who are to gratify desires. The list could go on and on.

This Bible study seeks to make the point that the biblical image "new creation" is an expression of God's vision or dream for the whole of cre-

can be hopeful. The Christian community is not limited by the facts and trends of the current situation, but instead can imagine a new state of affairs not yet fully existing.

This is possible because the church “sees with the eyes of faith.” We are given the ability to imagine God’s dream for the world: a time when the lion and the lamb will lie down together, when swords will be pounded into ploughshares, when war will be no more, when the captives will be freed and the blind will see, when the hungry will be fed and the naked clothed. In other words, when all of cre-

ation will be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth. This is God’s dream.

Learning how truly to see—to discover God’s dream for this time and place—is at the very heart of what it means to be the church. God has granted the Christian community a special sight, a spirit of wisdom and revelation that enlightens the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:17–18) to see the world as it really is—the creation of a loving God who will not leave us to our own pride and rebellion, but is faithful to the divine promise of full and abundant life.

## Discovering God’s Dream

We begin to discover God’s dream as we read, hear, and interpret Scripture together. The Bible opens up a vision of reality as God intends. The church is called continually to engage in Bible study—hearing, reading, marking, learning, inwardly digesting—because the Bible gives testimony to what God is doing with God’s people to accomplish God’s purpose.

The Bible is a living voice waiting to be heard, a voice seeking to give identity and purpose to God’s people. It is not a dead document. And all of God’s people—with all their differences and gifts—are needed for the discovery of God’s dream.

4. How does this text relate to your understanding and experience of the church?

## Colossians 3:1–17: God’s Chosen Ones

1. What enables the Christian community to live a true Christian life?
2. List all that the Christian community has “died to” (verses 5–11)? List all that it is to be “clothed with” (verses 12–14).
3. How are members of the community to relate to one another?
4. How would such a community manifest God’s dream?

## Questions for further reflection and discussion

*Discuss in small groupings and then share with the larger group.*

1. What insights are stimulated by thinking of the church as the “household of God”? What questions are stimulated?
2. What does the church have to do with the manifestation of God’s dream?
3. What, if anything, makes the church different from other human structures?
4. What have you learned about God’s dream from this study of the household of God?

ments and to the way of life in Christ. It is a way of life that does not make sense if lived apart. The Christian identity is distinctly a communal identity.

God's household — the church — is to make visible to the world a distinctive way of life. Through its relationships of fraternal love, mutual respect, and humble service, the church proclaims the redemption of God's creation in Jesus Christ. It is the manifestation of God's dream.

## Bible Study

*Read the texts and answer with others from the group.*

**Peter 2:9–10: God's Own People** (Refer to Exodus 19:6.)

1. What is the mission or purpose of "God's own people?"
2. How have they been constituted as God's people?
3. How do you respond to the assertion that as a member of the Christian community, you are part of a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation"?

**Ephesians 2:11–22: Members of the Household of God**

1. What was the situation of the Gentiles before Christ?
2. List the ways Christ has enabled the unity of Jews and Gentiles.
3. List the images used to describe the church in verses 19–22. What holds them together?

It is as we listen, reflect, and learn from the Bible and from one another that we discover the powerful force of the biblical story.

As we study together, the Spirit acts not only to in-form us, but also to trans-form us. As our church studies Scripture together we will begin to visualize and experience reality in a whole new way. In this study, "we are invited to open our eyes and see new life, open our minds and believe new life, open our hearts and love new life, open our hands and give new life. And we are invited to do this because Jesus is risen, and with him the new creation has come into being" (N.T. Wright).

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What are some of the things you hope will happen during this Bible study?
2. What comes to your mind when you hear the words "new creation"?
3. How does "becoming a people of the dream" fit with your understanding of the church?
4. Why should Christians study the Bible? What have been some of your experiences with Bible study?

*(Share your responses with others in the group.)*

## Session 2:

### God's Dream: The Good Creation

**G**od's dream is a rich and full one that encompasses the

whole of creation. God is the source and giver of all life—human and non-human.

There is nothing that is outside or beyond the love and mercy of God.

The first chapter of Genesis was most likely addressed to despairing Israelites who had been taken from their land and carried into exile. To a people whose world had fallen apart, this poetic narrative envisions a dependable world that has been created by a dependable God. The large scope of the narrative moves in dramatic fashion from God's confrontation with chaos (Genesis 1:2) to the joyous rule of God over a universe able to be at rest (2:1–4a). The creation story is an affirmation that the cosmos—the whole of the created order—is planned,

purposeful, and a trustworthy home for human and other forms of life.

In the Genesis creation story, God creates a world and declares it “good.” God creates human beings to be the crown of that creation. Created in the image of God, they are to represent God in the world and to represent the world to God. Psalm 8 celebrates this relationship. While at the center of this Psalm is an affirmation of human power and authority, it is surrounded by affirmations of praise: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:1, 9).

These affirmations of both the human and the divine are to be read together, for either taken alone will miss the point. The fullness of human life comes when we realize that we are creatures joyfully responding to our Creator. “All that we are and all that we

## Session 5:

### The Manifestation of the Dream: The Household of God

**T**hose who through faith “have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3), now become “living stones” of God’s household. The resurrection is not a private event that involved Jesus only. It is a public and world-wide event—the beginning of the “new creation.” And the reality of this new creation is made visible through the relationships, life, and structures of the household of God—the church.

Consider, for a moment, what God is doing: Although it may not be a familiar way of describing God, the Bible affirms that God is creating, redeeming, and sanctifying households. In ancient times, a household was not primarily defined by blood relationship, but by participation in the same fortunes, the same work,

the same successes and failures, and the same dangers. The communal identity of early Christians was shaped by the reality that they were now “members of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). All believers, former Gentiles and Jews alike, were “members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). And all believing households together constitute the one “household of God” (1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 4:17).

The word “household” is associated with many images: parenthood, childhood, birth, adoption, brother- and sisterhood, familial love, and domestic service. Describing the church as “household of God” indicates a communal understanding of the Christian experience. Membership in this new household involves sharing in a common life held together by shared commit-



**Acts 2:1–24: The Outpouring of the Spirit**

1. How is the appearance of the Spirit described? What does this imply about the Spirit?
2. What happens to the crowd? How does this contrast to what happened at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). In light of Babel, how is this an event of broken relationships healed?
3. How does Peter's sermon address God's dream (Acts 2: 17–21)?

**Questions for further reflection and discussion**

*Develop your responses with others and then share.*

1. Read Philippians 2:1–11. How does this reading shed light on the "supremacy" of Christ as expressed in the Colossians text?
2. How is humanity liberated from sin and the powers of a fallen world?
3. What do you think it means to say that Jesus Christ has redeemed God's dream? How does this fit with your previous understanding of the work of Jesus Christ?
4. How would you describe the new reality brought about by the Spirit at Pentecost?
5. What have you learned about God's dream of new creation from this study of healed relationships?

have comes from God, we are a part of God's dream of a good creation, and we are to use our freedom to do God's will. That is the biblical understanding of creation." (Verna J. Dozier)

**Bible Study**

*Read the texts, discuss the questions, and develop the answers by working with one or two others from the group.*

**Genesis 1:1–2:4a: In the Beginning God**

1. Read Genesis 1:2–2:4a aloud slowly and meditatively.
2. Notice that God's characteristic action is *to speak*. (Refer to Psalm 33:1–9; Romans 4:17; 2 Peter 3:5). What significance do you give to this emphasis on speech?
3. Make a list of God's commands, the results, and God's evaluation in Genesis 1:1–25. What does the movement of this passage (command, execution, and assessment) contribute to your understanding of God? To your understanding of the world?
4. In what ways have you heard this story being interpreted and used?

**Psalms 8: How Majestic is Thy Name**

1. Read Psalm 8 together.
2. Read Shakespeare's psalm-like praise of humanity:  
*What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how expressive and admirable!*

*In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!*

3. What are the similarities and the differences between these two affirmations?

### Questions for further reflection and discussion

*Discuss these questions and develop answers with others from the group.*

1. Many religions and some cultures have their own creation stories. If you know any, share them with the group. What are the special emphases in the biblical account of creation?
2. Genesis 2:1-3 has informed the Christian understanding of "sabbath." What significance do you give to the statement that God "rested on the seventh day?" Identify different interpretations and practices of sabbath.
3. Read Ephesians 1:9-10. What does this text say about God's intention for creation? How does it relate to the Genesis text?
4. What have you learned about God's dream from your study of the creation story?

distort God's dream for human life were confronted and defeated. The destruction brought about by human actions has been overcome by another human being who "wrapped himself in our sins." Through him, God's intent to heal and restore the fullness of life is accomplished. Jesus Christ brings about the end of the old, the breaking of the demonic powers and the opening of something new: the life of love and freedom.

Now begins the Spirit's mission—and that of the Christian community—to bear witness to Jesus Christ and of beginning of the renewal of God's dream for creation.

## Bible Study

*Read, talk, listen, and answer with others.*

### Colossians 1:15–20; 2:13–15: The Supremacy of Christ

1. How is Jesus Christ related to God's creation in this passage?
2. How is he related to the church?
3. How is reconciliation brought about?

### Romans 5:6–17: The Justification of the Ungodly

1. How is the relationship between God and humanity described in this passage?
2. How is reconciliation brought about?
3. How are Adam and Christ compared and contrasted?

## Session 4: The Redemption of the Dream: Healed Relationships

**M**artin Luther referred to John 3:16 as “The Gospel in Miniature”: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” This is Good News! God has not abandoned God’s crea-

tion. God has not left us to our own sin, our rejection of God’s dream, our desire “to make a name for ourselves,” and the results. The *life-giving* God who is the source of all reality is also the *life-saving* God who in loving sacrifice restores and renews humanity and the whole of creation to abundant life. God not only creates and sustains all that exists, but in Jesus Christ has overcome our bondage to sin and death. The relationships broken by human sin—with God, with one another, with the created world—have been

healed and restored. In Jesus of Nazareth, God turns toward the lost, the sinners, the outcast, and accepts them. God’s dream of the good creation has been redeemed in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The work of Jesus—his mission—was to reveal the truth that only in relationship with God can we truly be free. Rather than condemning the world for its failure, Jesus came into an alienated and hostile world to make peace and to give life. Our transition from the realm of sin and death to full and eternal life was brought about by Jesus’ direct challenge to the powers of a fallen world—but not in the expected manner. It is by Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and resurrection that the world is reconciled to God. The forces that limit, oppress, and

## Session 3: The Rejection of the Dream: Broken Relationships

**T**aken as a whole, Genesis 1-11 offers a twofold interpretation of the world and of human life. On the one hand, “God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). On the other hand, “And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt” (Genesis 6:12). Both statements are true at the same time. Seen as God’s creation and in terms of God’s gracious dream, the world and all that is in it is good. Seen in terms of human sin and the destructive violence unleashed by sin, it is corrupt. The biblical story holds together both the potential and creativity of human beings created in God’s image and the distortion of that potential through the pervasive corruption of sin.

The problem of sin enters with the breaking of the life-giving relationship between Creator and creation. It does not arise from earthly matter or from being a human creature. The stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden, Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, and the building of the Tower of Babel all illustrate this. Human beings are created in God’s image and called to live in harmony with God’s good creation. They “fall” into sin by attempting to become like God. Sin involves trying to possess what is freely given in relationship with God apart from that relationship. The breaking of this basic relationship spreads and distorts all the relationships essential to human life. Thus begins a tragic picture of destruction which starts with the basic community—the human couple, and then extends to the family, to the tribe, and finally, to the world of nations.

In the Garden of Eden, God offered human creatures a way of life in which God would be God and human beings would be the crown of creation. By rejecting God's care and wanting to secure their own well being, human beings said "No, we want to be God too!" With their eyes now opened, human beings began to seek power and control, desiring to "make a name

for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4) by building a city and reaching into the heavens. The crisis of human life results from broken relationships. Not wanting to be dependent upon the creator God who "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7), human beings misuse their God-given freedom and reject God's dream of a good creation.

## Bible Study

*Read the texts, discuss the questions, and answer with one or two other persons.*

### Genesis 3:1-24: The Serpent's Lie

1. In Genesis 3:1 the serpent asks a particular question. Notice Eve's nuanced response in verses 2-3. What does her response say about the way God cares for God's creatures?
2. What does the serpent promise?
3. As a result of their action, what happens to the relationship between Adam and Eve? To their relationship with God? How does "nakedness" reflect the changed relationships?
4. How do Adam and Eve account for their actions? (Whom do they blame?)

5. How have you heard this story interpreted and used?

### Genesis 11:1-9: The Tower of Babel

1. Why did they want to build the tower?
2. Why was God distressed by their actions?
3. What is the role of language within this story?
4. How have you experienced this story being interpreted and used?

## Questions for further reflection and discussion

*Answer these questions working with others in the group.*

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the words "The Fall"?
2. Where do you see and/or experience broken relationships?
3. Read Micah 6:8, Romans 1:18-25, and Matthew 5:38-48. Considering these texts in light of your study of God's good creation, what new insights do you have about the nature of sin?
4. What have you learned about God's dream from this study of broken relationships?

**APPENDIX H1**  
**“A PEOPLE OF SALT AND LIGHT” BIBLE STUDY**  
**INVITATION AND SCHEDULE**



The Coordinating Team would like to invite you to join them in 4 sessions with different topics of Bible Study. There are 2 dates per Bible Study for you to choose from. They will be hosted by different members of Slifers in their homes. So come join us for good conversation, good company, great people. Sign up sheet for participants is located in the back of church, or call the church and leave a message that you would like to attend and on what dates. Or if you have any additional questions, please contact the church at 937-696-2840.

SESSION	LED BY	DATE	TIME	HOSTED BY
1 – The Blessings of the Reign of God	Tangy Thomas	Saturday February 12 <sup>th</sup>	10:30 am to 12:00 pm	Greg & Cinda Shell (937-696-2088)67 Country Lane  Farmersville, OH 45325
1 – The Blessings of the Reign of God	Tangy Thomas	Tuesday February 15 <sup>th</sup>	7:00 pm to 8:30 pm	Jerry & Donna Ney (937-696-2876) 403 W. Center St. Farmersville, OH 45325
2 – A Church Living for the World	Justin Cline	Saturday February 19 <sup>th</sup>	10:30 am to 12:00 pm	Beth Ney (937-696-8206)  11977 Chicken Bristle Rd.  Farmersville, OH 45325
2 – A Church Living for the World	Justin Cline	Tuesday February	7:00 pm to	Sara Keener (937-835-5651)

		22nd	8:30 pm	3747 S. Diamond Mill Rd.  Germantown, OH 45327
3 – Jesus' Vision of Right Relationships	Jennifer Gray	Saturday February 26 <sup>th</sup>	10:30 am to 12:00 pm	Amy Cline (937-696-2595)  14996 Chicken Bristle Rd.  Farmersville, OH 45325
3 – Jesus' Vision of Right Relationships	Jennifer Gray	Tuesday March 1st	7:00 pm to 8:30 pm	Kathleen Boston (937-260-8392)  393 Lufkin Drive  New Lebanon, OH 45345
4 – A Model for Praying & Acting	Karel Hanhart	Saturday March 5 <sup>th</sup>	10:30 am to 12:00 pm	Janice Kronour (937-833-5079)  112 Villa Drive  Brookville, OH 45309
4 – A Model for Praying & Acting	Karel Hanhart	Tuesday March 8 <sup>th</sup>	7:00 pm to 8:30 pm	Linda Suttman (937-696-2350)  10700 F'ville-West Carrollton Rd.  Germantown, OH 45327

Blessings,

The Coordinating Team: Justin Cline, Paul Leatherman, Jennifer Gray, Tangy Thomas, Cinda Shell, Dan Schroer & Karel Hanhart

## **APPENDIX H2**

### **“A PEOPLE OF SALT AND LIGHT” BIBLE STUDY**



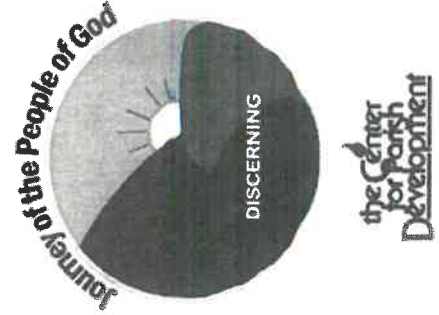
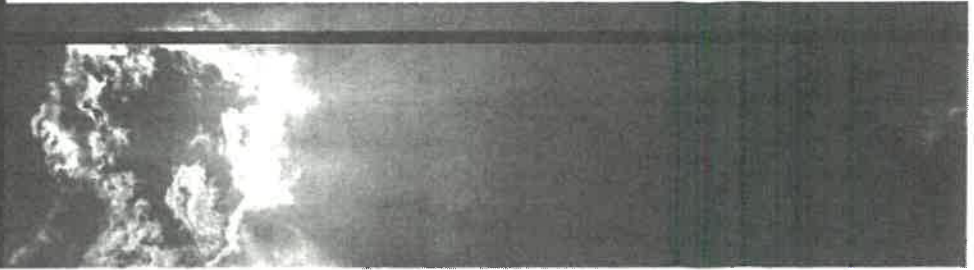
This Bible study is based upon the work of Inagrace T. Dieterich of the Center for Parish Development and James L. Bailey of Wartburg Theological Seminary. Many of the opening and closing prayers in each session were adapted from *Praying the Beatitudes* by Lois L. Barrett and used with permission. Bible texts quoted are from the NRSV.

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# A People of Salt and Light

## JESUS' MODEL FOR COMMUNITY



## Suggestions for using this Bible study

- Create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Make sure all persons in the group know one another. If possible, have coffee or other light refreshments available.
- When you gather, ask one member of your group to act as facilitator and timekeeper, to help the group stay on track and on time.
- As a reminder of the purpose, read the first two paragraphs of the Introduction at the beginning of each session.
- Read aloud the Bible passages for each session. Your group can decide whether or not to read aloud the material offered for reflection.
- Use the questions as a guide for your discussion. Don't get derailed by seeking the "right" answer.
- Be creative in supplementing the study: acting out texts, drawing symbols, using hymns, art objects, or poetry.
- This resource can be used in a variety of settings: in adult and youth education classes, with small groups, for church council meetings, on a congregational retreat, or as a special congregational series.
- A key component of Bible study is the experience of Christian community. Encourage persons to be open to one another, to listen to each other respectfully, and to speak the truth in love.
- *Engaging* in Bible study is an opportunity to hear God's voice speak in fresh ways to us. Spend time in prayer at the beginning and end of every session, asking God's Spirit to guide and enlighten the group.

We hope that this Bible study will refresh your hearts, renew your minds, and stimulate your imaginations as the church seeks to discern and participate in God's redemptive mission in a broken world.

**the Center  
for Parish  
Development**  
1448 E. 53rd Street  
Chicago, IL 60615  
www.missionalchurch.org

The staff of the  
Center for Parish Development

## A church living for the world

Jesus' vision of right relationships

A model for praying and acting

## Closing Petitions

Let us offer our prayers for peace in our community and our world. (Silence)

Let us ask for boldness in acting and speaking in Christ's name that others may find peace. (Silence)

Let us ask for awareness of the Spirit's presence with us whenever we act for righteousness' sake. (Silence)

Let us pray for all those who take risks for reconciliation. (Silence)

Let us ask for God's help in discerning where we should be bringing the message of reconciliation. (Silence)

(Here there may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions).

**Unison Prayer:** God of power and love, we thank you for your work of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We pray for your presence with us as we share in that reconciling task. We pray for courage to discover your will for us and to do it, in spite of the risks. We are grateful that all power belongs to you, that yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

## Pulling your Learnings together

### Prayer (Read responsively)

The wind of the Spirit challenges us to change:

*Give us courage to respond, O God.*

The fire of the Spirit calls us to a passion for the kingdom:

*Warm us and give us your energy, O God.*

The breath of the Spirit offers us new life:

*May we receive and live out the Gospel in the world.*

In a world where there is need and oppression, violence and alienation:

*May we bring life and love, O God.*

In a world where there is meaninglessness and emptiness:

*May we bring purpose and hope, O God.*

Lead us forth, Spirit of God, in joy and in faith, in truth and in freedom:

*In ways known and unknown, may we follow. Amen.*

### Jesus' Model of Community

This Bible study on the Sermon on the Mount invites you to take the quality of the life of your congregation seriously. Jesus' sayings are carefully organized to model for disciples, then and now, how to live together as a faithful community whose identity and activity is rooted in God's graciousness.

Review your insights and learnings over the four sessions of this Bible study. Considering your hopes and dreams for the future, what are some ways in which you can envision your church more faithfully and effectively expressing —

The blessings of the reign of God

## A PEOPLE OF SALT AND LIGHT: JESUS' MODEL FOR COMMUNITY

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up to the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying....* Matthew 5:1-2

Welcome to this Bible study! Your congregation is engaged in a journey to discover and embody God's vision and calling for your church. An important resource for discovering God's vision is the practice of Bible study in community. In this study, your congregation will consider the nature and purpose of Christian community in light of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount provides us with some of Jesus' most direct teachings about life together as his disciples. The goal of this study is to enable you and your congregation to tap into the power of Jesus words by asking the question, "What would it mean if contemporary Christians intentionally engaged Jesus' teachings as a model for community, as a guide for their life together?"

### Objectives

This Bible study is designed to enable participants to:

1. Engage with other members of your church while studying the Bible.
2. Share and explore their faith together.
3. Explore Jesus' vision or model of Christian community.
4. Experience Christian community through prayer, study, and

discussion.

5. Reflect on the life and ministry of your church in light of the Bible study.
6. Begin to envision how your church might more fully express the vision of Christian community expressed in Jesus' teaching.

### Design

This study resource is organized into four parts (plus this introduction and a brief conclusion). The sessions explore various aspects of the biblical vision of community. Each session contains biblical study, reflection material, and an opportunity for you to interact with other members of the group around what you are reading.

Session 1: The Blessings of the Reign of God

Session 2: A Church Living for the World

Session 3: Jesus' Vision of Right Relationships

Session 4: A Model for Praying and Acting

### The Sermon on the Mount: A vision for life in community

*Come to me, all you that are weary  
and are carrying heavy burdens, and  
I will give you rest. Take my yoke  
upon you, and learn from me; for I  
am gentle and humble in heart, and  
you will find rest for your souls. For  
my yoke is easy, and my burden is  
light.*

Matthew 11:28-30

are carrying, and offers relief. He is aware, responsive, and relevant. Yet the good news he proclaims is not only a promise but

5. What insights have you gained about the church living out a vision of Christian faithfulness?

*(Share your answers with others in the group.)*

### Closing Devotions

Invite the group to quiet itself. Have someone read each petition aloud, then pause for a minute of silence. Invite everyone to join in the unison closing prayer.

Let us bring our prayers to God, that we might forgive as  
God forgives. (Silence)

Let us bring to mind those times when God and others have  
shown mercy to us. (Silence)

Let us pray that God will give us the grace to show mercy to  
those who do not deserve it. (Silence)

Let us pray that, when it is difficult to forgive, God will  
show us the beginning of the path to forgiveness.  
(Silence)

Let us pray that we might come with clean hearts before  
God and the church. (Silence)

Let us pray for the commitment to know the right and to do  
it. (Silence)

Let us ask God to be with us always and to give us new  
understandings of what it means to see God. (Silence)  
(Here there may be a time of open prayer for participants to  
offer aloud their own petitions.)

**Unison Prayer:** Merciful God, as you have blessed us far  
beyond what we deserve, help us now to be merciful to oth-  
ers and to come with a pure heart into your presence.  
Amen.

progress, but participation in God's mission. True Christian faithfulness keeps the focus on God and the neighbor in need and avoids a righteous self-absorption that is so prevalent in the contemporary church.

### The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer provides a vision for the life of faith of the Christian community. It focuses the community's attention on the primary issues of the kingdom: the holiness of God's name, the appearance of God's gracious will in human affairs, and the basics needed for life and community: daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from temptation.

The importance given to this prayer does not mean that it is to be a substitute for other acts of faith. Rather, this prayer refocuses the community's vision, empowering its participants in an active life of faith. The Lord's Prayer binds the surprising graciousness of God to the community's urgent action.

### Questions for reflection and discussion

(Discuss in small groups and then share with the larger group.)

1. Read Matthew 6:1-18.
2. How does the above discussion of "the practice of Christian faithfulness" affirm or change your understanding of the Christian life?
3. Slowly read the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). List the issues of the kingdom with which this prayer is concerned. How does this prayer inform what the concerns of the church are to be? How does what we pray for in this prayer affirm or challenge our church's priorities?
4. What would a congregation be doing if the Lord's Prayer more fully shaped its praying and its acting?

also a summons: a new relationship with God expressed through discipleship. The way of Jesus Christ both requires and makes possible a new way of living in the world: a life of gratitude and obedience, of service and sacrifice, of celebration and commitment, and of freedom and responsibility.

Matthew's Gospel is very concerned with the life and practice of Jesus' followers. Jesus' teachings within the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) aren't really sayings about the *private individual's* moral character or behavior, although often read that way. Rather, they represent the quality of life and witness of

*communities of people* who have heard the gospel—the proclamation of the new life to be found in relationship with Jesus Christ—and are living out the implications of this good news.

The Sermon on the Mount is aimed at the community of faith, and has as its goal the guidance of those who would follow Jesus. *Your church* is that community of faith. *You* are being instructed by Jesus in a particular way of life. *You* are being called to both hear and live out the sayings of Jesus. This calling will require involvement and commitment; in other words, discipleship.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Share a hope you have for this Bible study as we get started.
2. What do you think will be different if we read the Sermon on the Mount as instruction for the community of faith living in God's grace?

## Session 1:

## The Blessings of the Reign of God

## Opening Prayer (Unison)

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open,*

*all desires known,*

*and from whom no secrets are hid:*

*Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts*

*by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit,*

*that we may perfectly love thee,*

*and worshipfully magnify thy holy name:*

*through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Read together:

Matthew 5:1-12

**T**he Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus' beatitudes. The

community lives under God's gracious blessing: "Blessed are you..." Jesus uses this form to declare persons

"blessed" whose attitudes and activities diverge markedly from those commonly as-

sumed and even celebrated in the Roman world. In that

world, it would be astonishing to claim that the poor in spirit,

the mourners, the meek, the

ones hungering and thirsting

after righteousness, the merci-

ful, the pure in heart, the makers of peace, and those persecuted for the sake of

righteousness are blessed by God.

The Beatitudes in

Matthew 5 describe the way of life of the disciple commu-

nity—those who follow Jesus.

Note that in this series of

eight beatitudes, the first and

last beatitudes carry the prom-

ise: "for theirs is the kingdom

of heaven [God]." The use of

this phrase at both ends of

the beatitudes is meant to

imply that everything in be-

tween—all of the beati-

tudes—describes the character

of the faith community that

## Session 4:

## A Model for Praying and Acting

## Opening Prayer (Read responsively)

*Group 1: For God alone my soul waits in silence,*

*from God comes my salvation.*

*Group 2: God alone is our rock and our salvation.*

*Our fortress; we shall never be shaken.*

*Together: Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this:*

*Power belongs to God, and*

*steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.*

## Read together:

Matthew 6:1-18

reveals that which otherwise would be hidden in darkness.

In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus warns his followers about

their acts of faith. He under-

stands our capacity to get it

wrong. By citing the three pil-

lars of Jewish devotion, Jesus

contrasts distorted and healthy

practices of *almsgiving* (6:2-4),

*praying* (6:5-6), and *fasting*

(6:16-18). The repetitious pat-

terns in the texts underscore

the difference between actions

that are self-serving and acts

of faith done in secret to

please God and help those in

need.

The real purpose of the

church's acts of faith is not

the individual's own spiritual

4. How might your congregation more fully manifest this vision of community?
5. What insights have you gained about the church as a community living in right relationships?

(Share your answers with others in your group.)

### Closing Devotions

Invite the group to quiet itself. Have someone read each petition aloud, then pause for a minute of silence. Invite everyone to join in the unison closing prayer.

Let us offer our prayers to God, asking God to take away our anxiety, our fear of enemies and those who want to hurt us. (Silence)

Let us pray that God may make us as meek, gentle, and non-violent as Jesus and the Christian martyrs who trusted in God rather than avenge wrongdoing. (Silence)

Let us ask God to strengthen our commitment to peace. (Silence)

Let us ask God to give us a hunger and a thirst for right relationships. (Silence)

Let us pray that God's love may be present in all situations where peace and justice are needed. (Silence)

Let us pray for all those who struggle against oppression. (Silence)

(Here there may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions.)

**Unison Prayer:** O God, we commit ourselves to your way of gentleness and right relationships, of peace and justice. Help us to trust in you to act on our behalf and on behalf of all those who suffer because of others' wrongdoing. Hold before our eyes the example of Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, in whose name we pray. Amen.

believes in God and trusts God's way.

This blessed community is to practice a new way of seeing and acting. The beatitudes offer a vision of a "contrast community."<sup>1</sup> A contrast community following the way of Jesus offers in its values,

priorities, and behaviors a life-giving alternative to the values, priorities, and behaviors of the world around it—whether the world of Jesus' day or 21st century North America.

<sup>1</sup> Although "contrast-community" is not a biblical concept, the reality which this term evokes fills the Bible from beginning to end: The People of God is meant to be something different from the world for the sake of God's mission to the world.

### Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Read the beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 again. Before focusing on Jesus' teachings, describe the scene (e.g., who is present, where are they, what are they doing, who is Jesus teaching?).
2. Which of the beatitudes particularly strikes you or catches your attention? What questions are stimulated?
3. How do the attitudes and activities described in the beatitudes compare to how society today views what it means to be "blessed?"
4. Why do you think it could be said that "it takes a community" to live the beatitudes?
5. What insights have you gained about the church as a "contrast community?"

(Share your responses with others in the group.)



### Closing Devotions

Invite the group to quiet itself. Have someone read each petition aloud, then pause for a minute of silence. Invite everyone to join in the unison closing prayer.

Let us offer our prayers of confession for the times we have tried to be self sufficient and have denied our need for God. (Silence)

Let us confess those things which have gotten in the way of our relationship with God. (Silence)

Let us pray for grace to be poor in spirit and to lean on God and each other. (Silence)

Let us pray for all who mourn their losses. (Silence)

Let us pray for grace to mourn with those who mourn and to share their suffering. (Silence)

Let us give thanks that God is merciful and gracious, hears our prayers, and grants our requests made in Jesus' name. (Silence)

(Here there may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions.)

**Unison Prayer:** Lord God, forgive us all our sins, heal all our infirmities, comfort our sorrows, and through your Spirit bring us closer to you, the one who reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

3. Love is not simply satisfied with declaring a divorce legal if a husband has a defensible reason to discard his wife, for radical love recognizes that divorce itself ruptures a God-established relationship

group), for radical love invites the community to engage enemies by undertaking positive action towards them (Matthew 5:43-47).

Above all, Jesus' sayings in Matthew 5:21-48 invite modern Christians to consider how they should act in the concrete situations of daily life. The six situations that Jesus' sayings focus on are key to the well-being of a community and its witness to outsiders.

4. Christians tell the truth without hedging their words, for radical love invites simple honest speech as a necessary ingredient for trustworthy relationships (Matthew 5:33-37).

5. It is not enough to limit retaliation by matching the punishment to the crime, for radical love encourages Christians to return good for evil in relationships inside and outside the community of faith (Matthew 5:38-42).

How a community responds to Jesus' radical call to love, to love even our enemies, reveals whether or not its members truly understand the character and purpose of Jesus' teaching and ministry.

6. Finally, it is not enough simply to love your neighbor (those of your own ethnic and religious

### Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Read Matthew 5:21-48 again. Describe the vision of reality that Jesus is communicating with these statements.
2. Which of the six examples of radical love do you find the most challenging? Why? Which would be most challenging for your congregation? Why?
3. How does Matthew 22:34-40 influence your understanding of Jesus' view of right relationships?



## Session 3:

### Jesus' Vision of Right Relationships

#### Opening Prayer (Unison)

*O God, the Holy Spirit,*

*Come to us, and among us;*

*come as the wind, and cleanse us;*

*come as the fire, and burn;*

*come as the dew, and refresh;*

*Convert, convert, and consecrate*

*many hearts and lives*

*to our great good*

*and to thy greater glory,*

*And this we ask for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen*

#### Read together:

Matthew 5:17-48

Matthew 22:34-40

In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus provides his interpretation

of several key commandments in the Jewish Law (found in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament). There is a sharp contrast between his interpretation (the way of radical love stated in Matthew 22:34-40) and widely-accepted understandings of first century Judaism. In doing so, Jesus provides six examples of

right relationships. These examples offer a guide for disciples to live in a manner compatible with Jesus' vision of reality. They are worthy of our attention and reflection.

1. It is not just murder that is the problem, for radical love avoids the expression of anger that destroys relationships in community and the name-calling that diminishes a Christian brother or sister (Matthew 5:21-26).
2. It is not just adultery that is the problem, for radical love avoids the willful lust that turns another human being into a sexual object (Matthew 5:27-30).

## Session 2:

### A Church Living for the World

#### Opening Prayer (Pray responsively)

*Group 1: Let the peoples praise you, O God;*

*let all the peoples praise you.*

*Group 2: Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,*

*for God judges the peoples with equity*

*and guides the nations upon earth.*

*Together: Let the peoples praise you, O God;*

*let all the peoples praise you.*

#### Read together:

Matthew 5:13-16

There is always a danger that a faith community becomes inward-focused and inclined to withdraw from the world. To counter this tendency, Jesus' sayings in the next segment of the Sermon on the Mount offer two images that emphasize the world-wide and world-affirming mission given to the Christian community: "You are the salt of the earth..." (5:13), and "You are the light of the world..." (5:14).

#### A calling that includes both a gift and a task

The community's mission you together) the light..." The as salt and light is a gift of verbs Jesus uses indicate a current reality. "You, all of you together *already are* the light of the world, the salt of the earth."

But these images also point to the task conferred upon the community of faith: "You *are* (all of you together) the salt..." and "You *are* (all of

Christ: "You are the salt of the earth..." "You are the light of the world..." Jesus' follow-up comments for both images emphasize the tragedy of salt that no longer serves as salt, and the absurdity of a city on the hill being hid or a lamp being put under a bushel rather than on a lamp stand. Put positively, salt is to do its salting and light is to do its illuminating. So it is with the community of Christ. It has a unique purpose and usefulness. If it does not fulfill this purpose, it is of no use. Jesus is also concerned

about the *doing* of his words, not just the *hearing* of them. Matthew 5:16 provides a key to these metaphors of mission in 5:13-15. Jesus declares, "Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." It is precisely the community's good works that give witness to a gracious God and through which the community itself is shaped. A community of faith is dramatically formed by what it does – and what it does not do.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Read Matthew 5:13-16 again. Consider the images as you read and listen: What do you think it means to be the "salt of the earth?" What does it mean to be "the light of the world?"
2. How is a faith community's mission a gift? How is it a task?
3. If a community is dramatically formed by what it does, what are some of the works that currently shape your congregation? What kind of a witness do these works present to the world?
4. How could your congregation live more fully as salt and light for the world?
5. What insights have you gained about the church as a community of salt and light?

(Answer the questions working with others in the group.)

## Closing Devotions

Invite the group to quiet itself. Have someone read each petition aloud, then pause for a minute of silence. Invite everyone to join in the unison closing prayer.

Let us offer our prayers for the church, that its saltiness may be restored. (Silence)

Let us pray for the church, that its light may not be hidden under a basket but put on a lamp stand. (Silence)

Let us pray that we may increase our will to live as a people of God's reign. (Silence)

Let us pray for those outside the church, that they may see Christ's light reflected in us. (Silence)

Let us ask God for guidance in discerning our call and knowing how we are to be different from the world around us. (Silence)

Let us ask for the courage and joy to pray, to speak, and to act as if the world is watching. (Silence)

Let us pray that we may have God's magnetic love for those outside the church, that they also may give glory to God. (Silence)

Let us pray in hope for that day when all the earth will worship God. (Silence)

(Here there may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer about their own petitions)

**Unison Prayer:** God, be gracious to us and bless us.

May your face shine upon us,  
that your way may be known upon earth,  
your saving power among all nations.

Let all the ends of the earth worship you. Amen.

## **APPENDIX II**

### **“CO-MISSIONED” BIBLE STUDY INVITATION AND SCHEDULE**

## Bible Study—Co-Missioned

Co-Missioned is a study of the different models for mission that are found in the Early Christian Communities. The four gospels and in the letters to the early Christian Communities shaped their missional response to their particular situations. All were quite different. It's hoped that this study will broaden our understanding of what our mission is to be.



Due to popular demand there will be two opportunities to attend these studies. One will be on Sunday morning before church at 9:00am, and the second will be on Tuesday evening at 7:00pm in someone's home.

### HOST

<b>Church</b>	<b>Session 1: A Community Proclaiming the Gospel</b> Sunday, May 15 <sup>th</sup> 9:00 am to 10:00 pm (Paul)
	<b>Session 1: A Community Proclaiming the Gospel</b> Tuesday May 17 <sup>th</sup> 7:00pm to 8:00 pm (Paul)
<b>Church</b>	<b>Session 2: The Church as Sign of the Reign of God</b> Sunday, May 22 <sup>nd</sup> 9:00 am to 10:00 pm (Justin)
	<b>Session 2: The Church as Sign of the Reign of God</b> Tuesday, May 24 <sup>th</sup> 7:00pm to 8:00 pm (Justin)
<b>Church</b>	<b>Session 3: A Sent Community</b> Sunday, May 29 <sup>th</sup> 9:00 am to 10:00 am (Pastor Karel)

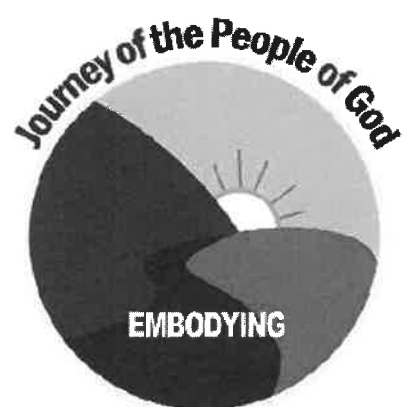
	<b>Session 3: A Sent Community</b> <b>Tuesday, May 31<sup>st</sup>      7:00pm to 8:00 pm</b> <b>(Pastor Karel)</b>
<b>Church</b>	<b>Session 4: A Community of Discipleship</b> <b>Sunday, June 5<sup>th</sup>      9:00 am to 10:00 am</b> <b>(Jennifer)</b>
	<b>Session 4: A Community of Discipleship</b> <b>Tuesday, June 7<sup>th</sup>      7:00pm to 8:00 pm</b> <b>(Jennifer)</b>
<b>Church</b>	<b>Session 5: A Community of Reconciliation</b> <b>Sunday, June 12<sup>th</sup>      9:00 am to 10:00 am</b> <b>(Tangy)</b>
	<b>Session 5: A Community of Reconciliation</b> <b>Tuesday, June 14<sup>th</sup>      7:00pm to 8:00 pm</b> <b>(Tangy)</b>

**APPENDIX I2**  
**“CO-MISSIONED” BIBLE STUDY**



# CO-MISSIONED!

**A Bible Study on  
Becoming a Missional People**



the Center  
for Parish  
Development

**Co-Missioned!**  
**A Bible study on Becoming a Missional People**

Missional congregations are called not simply to study Scripture but to be a people whose identity, common life, and shared ministry is shaped by their interaction with the biblical witness to God's "wonderful deeds." (I Peter 2:9). This Bible study, *Co-Missioned!* has been created to help congregations discover through Scripture the Holy Spirit's power to form their whole community of faith for its witness in the world.

Thanks go to Inagrace T. Dietterich and the Bible study *The Biblical Mission of the Church*, on which this study is based.

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## Suggestions for using this Bible study

1. When you gather together, ask one of your group to act as your facilitator and timekeeper, to help the group stay on track and on time.
2. Create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Make sure all persons in the group know one another. If possible, have coffee or other light refreshments available.
3. As a reminder of the purpose, read the Introduction at the beginning of each session.
4. Read aloud the Bible passages set for each study. Your group can decide whether or not to read aloud the other material offered for reflection.
5. Use the questions as a guide for your discussion. Do not get derailed by seeking the “right” answer.
6. Be creative in supplementing the study: acting out texts, drawing symbols, using hymns, art objects, or poetry.
7. This resource can be used in a variety of ways: adult and youth education classes, with small groups, for church councils, in a congregational retreat, or as a special congregational series.
8. A key component of Bible study is the experience of Christian community. Encourage persons to be open to one another, to listen to each other respectfully, and to speak the truth in love.
9. Engaging in Bible study is an opportunity to hear God’s voice speaking afresh to us. Spend time in prayer at the start of every session, asking God’s Spirit to guide and enlighten the group.

The staff of the  
Center for Parish Development

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## Session 1: \_\_\_\_\_

### Co-missioned!

*The question which has to be put to every local congregation is the question whether it is a credible sign of God's reign of justice and mercy over the whole of life, whether it is an open fellowship whose concerns are as wide as the concerns of humanity, whether it cares for its neighbors in a way which reflects and springs out of God's care for them, whether its common life is recognizable as a foretaste of the blessing which God intends for the whole human family.*

Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*

### Introduction

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is that we have four sources and numerous other writings which express the Good News of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. These include the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and letters to early Christian churches. Written by different people, each was shaped in response to the concrete situation of a particular group of people. Early Christian communities sought to discern and express the unique mission of Jesus for their time

and place. This variety of interpretations of Jesus' mission is the focus of this Bible study.

The approach of this study will be to acquaint ourselves afresh with the "great commissions" of Jesus. Quite often when people think of the mission of the church, they quote Matthew 28:18-20: "Go therefore and make disciples...." But along with Matthew's model of "making disciples" there are at least three other missional perspectives: from the gospel of Mark, Luke, and John, along

## SESSION 1: CO-MISSIONED

with testimony from the apostle Paul. This study will explore all five perspectives on what the mission of Jesus means for the contemporary community of faith situated in each unique time and place.

Each Bible study session will explore a particular model for understanding and living out the church's God-given mission.

Mark: A Community Proclaiming the Gospel

Luke: The church as a Sign of the Reign of God

John: A Sent Community

Matthew: A Community of Discipleship

Paul: A Community of Reconciliation

## *The New Testament Witness and Ours*

*The Gospel writings were not meant only to paint a picture of Jesus' life for those who might be interested. Instead, they are intended to "train us to situate our lives in relation to that life."*<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Gospel writings were not meant only to paint a picture of Jesus' life for those who might be interested. Instead, they are intended to "train us to situate our lives in relation to that life."

Most scholars believe that the Mark's was the first "gospel" ever written. The others followed. Thus a new literary form was created. It was the communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in

story form. The authors were not just handing on the words and stories of Jesus as they had received them. They were interpreting what they had received in order to proclaim the Gospel anew within the concrete situation of the communities of which they were a part. The purpose of the gospel story was not to entertain or simply to inform, but to provoke and invite a community – then and now – to participate in God's mission

## SESSION 1: CO-MISSIONED!

for the sake of the world.

Our congregation also must learn how to interpret and witness to God's creative and mighty presence in our changing context. We too must learn how to see God active both within the history of Jesus, and within the present life and ministry of our congregation. At its heart, this study is about Jesus' mission and ours. Through the process of discussion and reflection together we will be developing the practice of "interpreting" Jesus mission anew for our congregation's life. We will discover our co-mission with Jesus and with each other for the sake of the world God loves.

**Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. Why do we have one Gospel of Jesus Christ but different ways of expressing and interpreting that Gospel, even within scripture?
2. Why is it important to "revisit" the New Testament story of Jesus as you make key decisions about your congregation's future direction?

## SESSION 2: MARK

## Session 2: \_\_\_\_\_

### MARK: A Community Proclaiming the Gospel

*Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.*  
(16:15)

Mark wrote his gospel for households of faith who still understood themselves as a group or sect within Judaism. As such, they were caught, with the rest of the Jewish population, in the middle of a severe social and political crisis. Out of concern

for them, Mark takes the stories of Jesus and reinterprets them. He proclaims the Christian message for a frightened and bewildered Christian community. Desperately in need of a fresh perspective, this gospel is written to give them courage and hope. It is aimed to help these small communities of believers come to terms with the de-

mands and dangers of their times as they sought to be faithful to Jesus and his teachings.

Read Mark 1:15. With this announcement the stage is set.

**According to Mark, the proclamation of the Gospel is proclamation in action.**

Through the power of the Spirit in Jesus of Nazareth the promised and long expected redemptive rule of

God has drawn near. To proclaim this Good News takes much more than verbal statements. Actually, in Mark deeds have precedence over words. It is only by presenting the full range of Jesus' activity – preaching, teaching, healing, exorcising, calling and forming disciples, feeding, comforting, confronting – that God's rule can be adequately described.

## SESSION 2: MARK

The proclamation of the Gospel is proclamation in action.

Thus Jesus' ministry responded to human need wherever he found it. He dealt with physical illness (read 6:56). He also responded to needs which were more spiritual: forgiveness, liberation, dignity, social acceptance, and affirmation. The mission of Jesus was good news – the rule of God has come near to confront and challenge any power whatsoever that oppresses or diminishes human life.

But Jesus' ministry also challenged existing assumptions about

God and what God was doing: The people of Israel were expecting the rule of God to come by

means of a strong and mighty national leader who would restore the former glory of David's kingdom. These as-

sumptions about the nature and quality of the Messiah's mission are redefined by this gospel-writer. Jesus' identity is more closely aligned with that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah than with a military and conquering Messiah. When Jesus predicts his own suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31), he takes to himself not power, but service, suffering, and sacrifice. Then, as they travel to Jerusalem, Jesus challenges the disciples to join him in his destiny, in his life-giving death. "Take up [your] cross and follow me" (8:34).

Discipleship involves not power, prestige, and position, but following the crucified Jesus. Within the gospel of Mark, the cross is the model for genuine discipleship.

**The Christian community is called to proclaim the Gospel by taking up a life of service, suffering, and sacrifice together.**

The ministry of Jesus and his challenging call together are seen as "good news" within the Gospel of Mark.

## SESSION 2: MARK

Jesus announces a new reality in which the poor, the diseased, the oppressed, the marginalized – even children – have central places. The communities of faith at the center of the evangelist’s concern are invited to form themselves in such a way that they represent this new reality. They proclaim the Gospel by taking up a life of service, suffering, and sacrifice together.

***Bible Study on Mark:  
Proclaiming the Gospel***

1. Read Mark 10:32-45. Try to put yourself in the place of the disciples. How would you respond to Jesus’ account of what will happen to him?
  - a. How does Jesus’ rejection, suffering and death relate to his proclamation of the kingdom of God?
  - b. What kind of Messiah do contemporary Christians believe in and pray for?
  - c. What do you think it means to follow a Jesus who was crucified?
2. Read Mark 16:14-20. Jesus’ last commission. Based upon your reading and study so far, what is the “good news” the disciples are to proclaim to the whole creation?
3. What role should service, suffering, and sacrifice play within the ministry and mission of today’s churches?
4. If your church were to adopt Mark’s model of mission – a community proclaiming the Gospel – what would be different?



## SESSION 3: LUKE

## Session 3:

# LUKE: The Church as Sign of the Reign of God

*Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. (24:47)*

**L**uke-Acts, written as two volumes by the same author, was addressed primarily to Gentile Christians. More than a half century had passed since those momentous events that swirled around Jesus of Nazareth. Much had happened during the intervening years. The Zealot movement within Judaism had precipitated the Jewish War which, in turn, had led to the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome and almost totally changed the face of Judaism. The Christian church, which began as a renewal movement within Judaism had, during the preceding four decades undergone an almost complete transformation. It was no longer winning any significant numbers of Jews to faith in Jesus Christ. It had, for all intents

and purposes, largely because of the missionary work of Paul, become a Gentile church.

A degree of stagnation had set in. The church was now a church of second generation Christians and had all the characteristics of a movement that no longer shared the fervor and dedication of recent converts. The return of Christ for which the church had prayed and which had been fervently expected by the first generation of believers did not take place. Within the church there was a decline of enthusiasm and a major religious disappointment. Outside there was growing hostility and opposition from both Jews and others in the Roman world. Gentile Christians were asking fundamental questions about mission:

## SESSION 3 ■ LUKE

"Who are we really? And how are we to relate to the earthly Jesus, who is gradually and irrevocably receding into the past?"

Luke attempted to help the Gentile churches. He emphasized that through the Holy Spirit the risen Christ

was present in the community. By the power of the Holy Spirit, these communities of faith are called to

be signs of the reign of God. Luke challenged these mainly Gentile faith communities not to be like the world around them, a world which, as now, favored the rich, the powerful, the influential. "The church is to be a sign of God's reign and not a sign of the Roman Empire. The church is not to model itself after anything or any reality except the in-breaking reign of God."<sup>2</sup> Luke's description of the reign of God called for resistance and even opposition to the domi-

nant culture's standards and norms.

Criteria for evaluating the community's faithfulness to this calling are the same criteria that Jesus proposed in response to the question asked by the disciples of John the Baptist: "Are you he who is to

come, or are we to wait for another?"

...Tell John, "The blind receive their sight, the

lame walk, the

**Luke challenged the mainly Gentile faith communities not to be like the world around them.**

lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (7:22-23).

The faith community is to be judged and evaluated by God's standards, not by Roman standards. According to Luke, the church's mission is to become a very specific *sign of the reign of God*.

## SESSION 3: LUKE

***Bible Study on Luke:  
Sign of the Reign of God***

1. Read Luke 4:14-30. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue, he read from the book of Isaiah. Read those words as well: Isaiah 61:1-2.
  - a. What do we learn about who Jesus is and what he will be about in his ministry from his choice of this text?
  - b. Consider those to whom the good news is addressed in this text. How are those persons and situations present today?
  - c. Who are the excluded ones in today's society? What is the message your church is giving to them? What, if any, "good news" is being proclaimed to them?
2. Read Luke 24:44-49. Jesus' last commission.
  - a. How is "repentance and forgiveness" a sign of the in-breaking of the Reign of God?
  - b. How would you like to see your church "practice" forgiveness?
3. If Luke's model of mission – sign of the reign of God – was adopted by your church, what would be different in its life and in its actions?

## SESSION 4 JOHN

## Session 4: JOHN: A Sent Community

*As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (20:21)*

**I**n the Gospel of John, LIFE is the purpose of Jesus' coming (read 10:10). Jesus proclaims and brings life. The stated purpose of the Gospel of John is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). The work of Jesus—his mission—is to reveal the truth from God that makes people truly free, "to save the world and not to judge it," to "give life," by "coming" into the world, by words, signs, and works, by his life and by his death. (Read 3:15-17). Participation in this new life is not only a future hope, but a present possibility because the light and life of all the world is found in Jesus Christ.

John's model of mission is seen most clearly in Jesus' last commission to his disciples (Read 20:19-23). This narra-

tive indicates the launching of the church, a movement sent into the world in the same way Jesus was sent into the world. "As the father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus himself, "the sent one," provides the model for the church's mission. Through his own being and coming, living and teaching, dying and rising, Jesus Christ revealed the truth about God, about himself, about the life and destiny of humanity. It is this truth which motivates and guides the mission of the church.

While in the other Gospels the disciples are given specific tasks, "to make disciples," "teaching and preaching," "to proclaim the good news," "to announce repentance and forgiveness," in John there are few indications of why they are sent or what they are to do. Only one clue is given: "As the Father has

## SESSION 4: JOHN

sent me.” The disciple community is neither to withdraw from the world into a religious sanctuary; nor is it to engage with the world on the world’s terms. Following Jesus, the mission of the sent community is to proclaim and embody God’s love in such a way that persons are drawn into communion with God.

As commissioned and authorized by the Risen Lord, when the disciple community forgives or an-

nounces forgiveness, something real happens. God’s love and forgiveness is mediated through

the words and actions of those who are called and sent into the world as Jesus was sent. “Thus the sent community by its proclamation or by its neglect of proclamation; by its love or lack of love; by its accepting or rejecting attitude; by its judgmental or by its pas-

toral approach, is conveying forgiveness or unforgiveness!”<sup>3</sup> In John’s model of mission, the church does not *have* a mission, it *is* a mission—God’s mission. The church is a “sent” community, sent to manifest God’s redemption of the world in Jesus Christ.

The church’s call to be sent as Jesus was sent is reinforced by the promise of the presence and power of the

Holy Spirit.

In the Gospel of John, the Spirit is called the *Paraclete*, which means Helper, Comforter, Advocate,

Intercessor, or Mediator. The church enjoys the full benefits of Jesus’ life-giving work because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church can participate in the mission of Jesus only because it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Both in its life and in its service the

**God’s love and forgiveness is mediated through the words and actions of those who are called and sent into the world as Jesus was sent.**

## SESSION 4: JOHN

church is dependent upon the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the church as a sent community is the work of the Spirit from start to finish – “it is not essentially a task laid upon the church; it is a gift given to the church. It is an overflow of Pentecost.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Bible Study on John: A Sent Community***

Read John 20:19-23. Jesus’ last commission. The disciples had withdrawn behind locked doors. In this situation Jesus comes to them. He breathes on them, confers the Holy Spirit upon them, and sends them in the same way as he was sent.

1. How and in what ways has today’s church withdrawn from the world? What doors are “locked” in today’s churches?
2. Most people would rather not depend upon other people for God’s love and forgiveness. What if God’s love and forgiveness were only known and experienced through the words and actions of the Christian community?
3. What difference will the Holy Spirit make in the life of the church? What will the Spirit bring to the church?
4. If your church adopted John’s model of mission – *a sent community* – what would be different in its life and in its actions?

## SESSION 5: MATTHEW

## Session 5: \_\_\_\_\_

### MATTHEW: A Community of Discipleship

*Make disciples of all nations. (28:19)*

**M**atthew was writing around 80-90 A.D. as a member of a small Christian community that had left Judea before the Jewish war (the uprising against Rome) and settled in a predominantly Jewish community in Syria. His concern was not so much to write up the life of Jesus but rather "to provide guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission."<sup>5</sup> The small "household of faith" to whom Matthew was writing existed in and around Antioch, located in Syria, an

area that was experiencing extensive transition as it was becoming increasingly

urbanized. The people in the area, and in the little Christian community, were living through a transition from rural to urban culture, from the Aramaic language to the Greek language, from an ethnically homogeneous people of lower income to an ethnically heterogeneous people that included many of higher economic status. Greek culture was invading the area. While the process of urban-

ization was economically benefiting many, still much poverty yet surrounded Matthew's community of faith.

**Discipleship in Matthew is focused on right relationships both within the community of faith and in the way this community of faith relates to the world.**

The theological heart of Matthew's gospel is that Christian communities of

## SESSION 5 MATTHEW

faith cannot be based on race, blood, status, or wealth, as was the surrounding society. The new communities which are formed in allegiance to Jesus can be based only on whether a person lives a life of obedience -- discipleship -- a life that reflects the will of God. Discipleship in Matthew is focused on right relationships both within the community of faith and in the way this community of faith relates to the world. The relational focus of discipleship in all cases according to Matthew is also translated correctly as *justice*. The work of justice includes right relationship, doing the will of God, and being obedient to the teachings of Jesus.

The new communities of discipleship, seeking to live in obedience to the will of the One who sent Jesus, strove to be inclusive communities. These communities of faith struggled not to organize their life around status and power, but around inclusive love and genuine hospitality toward all. The mission of the church according to Matthew was to become a faithful *community of discipleship*.

### ***Bible Study on Matthew: Community of Discipleship***

1. "Marks" of discipleship -- those who participate in the ministry of Jesus Christ -- are described in Matthew. Read the following texts:

Matthew 10:17; 16:24-25 (a readiness to suffer)

Mt.19:23-26; 6:19-21 (to be poor)

Mt.18:1-5 (to be humble)

Mt. 25:31-40 (to love)

Mt.23:6-7 (1-12) (to reject worldly honor)

Mt.20:20-28 (to serve)



## SESSION 5: MATTHEW

- a. What are the essential ingredients of discipleship according to Matthew?
  - b. Applying Matthew to our own lives today, where do you see tension between these qualities of discipleship and our contemporary society?
  - c. Where and how is learning about discipleship occurring within your congregation?
2. Read Matthew 22:34-40 and 28:16-20. These texts invite us to link Matthew's Great Commandment with the last commission, to connect "right relationships" with making disciples and becoming a faithful community of discipleship.
  - a. Where and how is loving – loving God and loving your neighbor – being taught and practiced in your congregation?
  - b. If discipleship was at the heart of the ministries (such as teaching, preaching, social ministry, pastoral care, worship) of your church, what would change?
3. If your church was to adopt Matthew's model of mission, what would be different?

## Session 6: \_\_\_\_\_

### PAUL: A Community of Reconciliation

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18)*

Paul's letters were written to young churches throughout the Mediterranean area, an area dominated by the Roman army but deeply influenced by Greek culture. In this context, Paul maintained that in Jesus Christ, God has initiated a new state of affairs. The Jewish Law as

**God has initiated a new state of affairs... The final, coming age of God's forgiveness and love – God's future – has begun.**

a way of salvation has been superseded by the crucified and risen Messiah. The final, coming age of God's forgiveness and love – God's future – *has* begun. Therefore salvation in Christ is now to be offered to the Gentile world. All persons are to be invited to participate in the new community, the church.

Paul instructed the churches to whom he wrote that they were a community of a special kind. It is like this: The whole human community and all creation that is existing in an alienated and estranged

state is becoming transformed. This transformation is becoming concretely realized in the life and rela-

tionships of a specific human community – the community of faith in Jesus Christ. This community – a community of reconciliation – is a new creation.

But, in the faith communities to whom Paul was writing, living in transformed and reconciled relationships was difficult. Precisely for this reason

## SESSION 6: PAUL

the establishment of supportive communities was crucial. The realization of God's reconciliation with the world would be impossible without new communities where love, forgiveness, and mutual accountability could be concretely experienced.

Paul's vision of the church's mission is a *community of reconciliation*. The small Pauline churches were so many "pockets" of an alternative lifestyle that penetrated the norms of society around them.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation" Christians are to be "without blemish" and shining "as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15). According to Paul, this people, among whom God's reconciliation can become a personal, social, and communal reality, is precisely what the body of Christ has to offer the world.

### ***Bible Study on Paul: Community of Reconciliation***

1. Read Philippians 2:1-18. A particular way of life – a way of being in relationship with one another for the sake of the world – is envisioned throughout Paul's letters to the New Testament churches. This way of life is pictured in Philippians 2.
  - a. What "mind" is to exist among those who are "in Christ" or "in the Spirit?"
  - b. Does the mind of Christ mean there are to be no differences within the Christian community? If not, what does it mean?
  - c. How would the mind of Christ be manifested within a setting (inside or outside the church) of differences, opposites, and even enemies?

## SESSION 6: PAUL

- d. How would you like to see the mind of Christ have greater sway in your church?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. God has reconciled the world to God's self and has given the Christian community the message and the ministry of reconciliation.
- a. Taking our cues from the Good News that we are reconciled to God, what would a ministry of reconciliation look like for the church?
  - b. What does a community of reconciliation have to offer the world?
3. What would be different in the life and actions of your church if it adopted a *community of reconciliation* as its model of mission?

## SUMMARIZING OUR LEARNINGS

## **Summarizing our Learnings** \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

Five understandings of the mission of the church were explored in this Bible study. As you consider how your church is to embody God's vision for its future, what insights did you gain from this study:

**Mark – A Community Proclaiming the Gospel**

**Luke – The Church as Sign of the Reign of God**

**John – A Sent Community**

**Matthew – A Community of Discipleship**

**Paul – A Community of Reconciliation**

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Keith A. Russell, *In Search of the Church: New Testament Images for Tomorrow's Congregations* (Alban Institute, 1994) p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Mortimer Arias and Alan Jones, *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism* (Abingdon Press, 1992) p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: A Gift, A Command, An Assurance* (Friendship Press, 1988) p.17.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 150.

For more information about Bible studies and other resources  
to support transformation in your church, please contact:



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